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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 6 February 2025

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Biodiversity Recovery

1. **Andrew George** (St Ives) (LD): What steps he is taking to promote biodiversity recovery. [902591]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): This Government are determined to halt and reverse the trend of nature loss in our country and end the cycle of destroy, regret and restore. We are investing £400 million in tree planting and peatland restoration. We have announced a new nature restoration fund and set out plans to end the use of neonicotinoid pesticides that harm our precious pollinators.

Andrew George: I am grateful to the Minister for her reply. The UK is one of the most nature-depleted nations on this planet. The “State of Nature Report 2023” indicated that up to one in six UK species faces the risk of extinction. The Minister’s reply is very encouraging, but just last week the Chancellor, promoting the Government’s growth agenda, urged us to

“stop worrying about bats and newts.”

If it really does come to that, who speaks for the Government, and whose side is the Minister on—the Chancellor or threatened wildlife?

Mary Creagh: We have to end the false dichotomy between creating places for people and creating places for nature. The previous Government introduced biodiversity net gain, which means that when a developer builds somewhere, they must deliver a 10% BNG for nature. That is in its early stages, after just a year, but we are looking to see how it might be extended. With the nature restoration fund, we have established a more efficient and effective way to allow obligations related to our most important sites and species to be discharged at scale, which has the greatest environmental benefit and is a win-win for nature and people.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on announcing our plan to ban bee-killing pesticides. That is welcomed across Monmouthshire,

particularly by our fantastic charity based in Monmouth, Bees for Development. Does she agree that where the Conservatives failed, this Government will restore nature and biodiversity for future generations?

Mary Creagh: I do agree, and I pay tribute to the people who are speaking for the bees in my hon. Friend’s constituency. We will deliver 30 by 30 on land in England. That means that we will protect and preserve 30% of our land for nature and long-term conservation and management as part of our contribution to international targets.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): When we thought it could not get any worse, the Government roll out their latest attack on our farming community and UK food production, setting the direction that they want to replace food production, with around 20% of farmland being dedicated to solar farms, tree planting, biodiversity offsetting and wildlife habitats, all to meet green targets. The figures are astonishing, with the Government proposing to take well over 1 million hectares out of food production.

The economic analysis already predicts that well over 12,000 farms will be lost within a generation as a result of this Government’s policies. Will the Minister acknowledge that hard-working farmers are being caught in the crossfire in this Government’s dash towards green targets, and does she recognise the fear among our farmers that their policies amount not to food security but food lunacy?

Mary Creagh: That is a lot of sound and fury, but this is something the Conservatives were working on in government. This has shades of the deposit return scheme, which was essentially the hon. Gentleman’s legislation, but those on the shadow Front Bench were absent without leave when it came to the vote. We have published a consultation on the land use framework. It has been welcomed by the National Farmers Union and by farmers for giving certainty and security—something that was sadly lacking from the previous Government.

Water Company Executives: Accountability

2. **Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase the accountability of water company executives for service failures. [902593]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): I thank my hon. Friend for his service on the Water (Special Measures) Bill Committee. He will know that the Bill creates new powers for the regulator, including banning the payment of unjustified bonuses for water bosses whose companies fail to meet environmental standards and ensuring that imprisonment is a sentencing option where environmental regulators are obstructed. That will hold water companies and their executives to account. In addition, we are doubling compensation for poor service to hold water companies to account for failure in their service delivery.

Darren Paffey: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. Many of my constituents in Southampton Itchen have written to me, outraged at the 53% bill increase that Southern Water is proposing at a time when it and

others continue to pollute our rivers at an alarming rate. This is simply becoming a national scandal. As part of the work of the coming independent water review, will the Secretary of State ensure that water companies get back to delivering reliable services for customers, rather than lining the pockets of executives and shareholders?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Bills, of course, are going up because the previous Government did nothing as our sewerage infrastructure crumbled and millions of pounds were allowed to be diverted to pay for bonuses and dividends instead of investment. This Government have ringfenced the money earmarked for infrastructure so that this scandal can never happen again.

Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Essex and Suffolk Water has issued a moratorium on commercial businesses pulling water out of the ground, which it says is due to the Environment Agency. The problem is that water-intensive businesses need water to grow. Aspsall in my constituency has £10 million of investment ready to go to grow its cidery. Without access to water, it cannot make that investment. If this Government are serious about going for growth, will the Minister meet me to find a solution to the moratorium so that we can move forward?

Steve Reed: I am more than happy to ask the Minister for water, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), to meet the hon. Gentleman, who raises an important point. I have asked Sir Jon Cunliffe to look at how we can better manage this as part of the work he is leading.

River Health

3. **Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): What steps he is taking to help reduce sewage in rivers. [902594]

5. **Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): What steps he is taking to help improve the health of rivers. [902597]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): The previous Government did nothing as water companies discharged record levels of sewage into our waterways. The Water (Special Measures) Bill will create new powers, including banning water companies that pollute from paying bonuses, and bringing criminal charges against persistent lawbreakers. Ofwat has confirmed a record £104 billion investment to fix our broken water infrastructure and end the Tory sewage scandal once and for all.

Tom Gordon: In Harrogate and Knaresborough, the River Nidd regularly overflows with sewage. When I visited the Killinghall sewage treatment works last year, a key thing that came to light was that water companies are putting in infrastructure to manage the current sewage issue, rather than future-proofing. What steps will the Minister take to ensure we build sewage works that meet both current and future demand?

Steve Reed: The money announced in Ofwat's final determination before Christmas will create record levels of investment in our water system to do precisely what

the hon. Gentleman says, dealing with the current sewage problems while also putting in place the infrastructure to manage and meet future demand.

Ellie Chowns: As the Secretary of State knows, North Herefordshire is badly affected by water pollution, with devastating effects for the local economy. He also knows that agricultural pollution, not sewage, is the main problem in my constituency. He did not mention that in his answer, so I respectfully remind him yet again that the Government need to tackle agricultural pollution and sewage pollution in a joined-up way. We know the solutions—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ellie Chowns: I apologise, Mr Speaker. I will get to my point. As the Minister did not answer the first part of the question, I had to raise it. In North Herefordshire, we know that the solutions require farmers, regulators and environmental organisations to take action together. Will the Secretary of State now commit the funding needed to take forward the Wye catchment plan, and will he visit North Herefordshire with me?

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Minister has heard the question.

Steve Reed: The hon. Lady makes an important point. Our farming road map will look at how we can reduce run-off from agriculture, which is a major source of pollution in our waterways. We are looking at how we can move to catchment-based models, including for the Wye, where a great deal of important work has already been done, so that we can more effectively tackle all the sources of pollution that are causing such trouble for our waterways.

Flood Preparedness Projects

4. **Zöe Franklin** (Guildford) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to support flood preparedness projects. [902595]

8. **Mr Joshua Reynolds** (Maidenhead) (LD): What steps he is taking to support flood preparedness projects. [902600]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): The first duty of any Government is to protect our citizens, so we are investing a record £2.65 billion over two years in building, maintaining and upgrading flood defences, which will protect 66,500 properties across England.

Zöe Franklin: Across my constituency of Guildford, the local flood forums work tirelessly, bringing together agencies and residents to address the growing concerns they have about flooding. Will the Minister provide detail on how the Government will ensure that constituencies like mine, which often miss out because they are semi-rural and urban, get the funding they need to address current flooding issues? How can we mitigate the growing flooding issues across Guildford in a holistic and sustainable way?

Emma Hardy: The hon. Lady is right to highlight that under the previous funding formula, rural communities often missed out on the defences they desperately need.

We have set out plans to consult on a new formula that is going to be announced fairly shortly, and she will be very welcome to contribute to that.

Mr Joshua Reynolds: Will the Minister confirm what portion of the £2.6 billion allocated to flood preparedness will be used in my constituency of Maidenhead, specifically to protect the villages of Hurley and Cookham?

Emma Hardy: I think I will be getting a lot of questions like this today, Mr Speaker. We will announce where the 31 projects will be by the end of March. We will also be looking at where we have had to put money into maintenance and upgrading defences. We were left with flood defences in their worst state on record because of a complete dereliction of duty by the previous Government, so we have had to prioritise maintenance as well as building new defences, but I am hoping that the hon. Gentleman will not have to wait too long.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Minister and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State deserve great credit for attracting the large investment that they have secured, but once they have finished the lap of honour, they will be aware that this is the first step up the mountain. The Minister is right that the Government have inherited flood defences that are in an appalling state, and the latest estimate shows that as many as 6 million houses are at risk of flooding. I call on her to get on with the flood improvements that we demand in Chesterfield. First, will she tell us more about how she will ensure the money will be spent wisely? Secondly, how will she ensure that the Treasury understands that this is not a one-year commitment, but something that we will need for the rest of this term in office?

Emma Hardy: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and may I congratulate him on his recent engagement? He is right to point out the importance of money being spent wisely now to save money in the future. There are a couple of interesting factors: every £1 we spend on maintenance of flood defences saves £13 in damage prevention, and every £1 we spend on new defences saves £5 in damage prevention. Those are important statistics that I use frequently in negotiations about future spending reviews with Treasury officials.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): In the north of my constituency, between the Scottish border and Hadrian's wall, lie the debatable lands, but in the centre of Carlisle lies a forgotten land along the River Caldew. It is forgotten because of the incompetence of the Conservatives, who failed to deliver the flood defences along the Caldew that were promised after Carlisle was devastated in 2015. Will the Minister remember the forgotten lands of Carlisle?

Emma Hardy: My hon. Friend makes a persuasive case, as she has done at every oral question time we have had so far. She is right to highlight the fact that not only did the previous Government leave our defences in the worst state on record, but they failed to spend some of

the money that had been allocated. This Government are having to deal with that, along with the many other issues we are cleaning up.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Yet another wet winter across Somerset highlights the need for the Government to urgently deliver solutions to mitigate the impact of flooding on farmland and protect domestic food production. The Brue headwaters multi-benefit project, facilitated by the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group South West, is working with farmers and landowners in Bruton, Charlton Musgrove and Wincanton to address flooding issues and to hold workshops that focus on natural flood management, to slow the flow of water across the upper Brue, thus reducing flooding, sediment run-off and the associated pollution of water-courses. Despite those efforts, many farmers in the catchment, and indeed the county and the country, are angry at the level of inundation of land that could be prevented by better flood management. How will the Minister work to support farmers, build flood resilience and protect food security?

Emma Hardy: The hon. Lady is right to point out how angry farmers are and how they feel they have been let down by the previous Government on flood defences. The previous formula allocated funding only based on numbers of properties protected and paid little regard to rural areas. She also mentioned one of my favourite themes: natural flood management. We recently held a roundtable on that, with representatives from the NFU and the Country Land and Business Association, to talk about how we can better protect our rural areas in a more nature-friendly way.

Cat Breeding: Regulation

6. Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Whether he plans to regulate the breeding of cats. [902598]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): Under the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018, anyone in the business of breeding and selling cats as pets needs to have a valid licence issued by their local authority, and licensees must meet strict statutory minimum welfare standards, which are enforced by local authorities.

Mr Bedford: As a proud cat dad to two cats, one of which was beaten to the title of Purr Minister by Attlee, Mr Speaker's cat, it has amazed me to find out that the 2018 regulations on animal breeding focus merely on dogs and not cat breeding. Can the Minister therefore assure me that he will look at updating the regulations to include cats?

Daniel Zeichner: I thank the hon. Member for his question and for his references. The Animal Welfare Committee has provided its opinion on the welfare implications of current and emergent feline breeding practices, and we will be looking at those and coming back with measures in future. In passing, may I pay tribute to organisations such as Cats Protection, which does such wonderful work? I am told that it recently

pointed the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), to her new kittens, Lily and Meglatron.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): There are 12.5 million cat owners in the UK, and hundreds of thousands of cats are killed on the roads every year. The previous Government agreed that it would be right to include cats in the Road Safety Act 2006, but they simply did not do it. This means that cats are regularly hit and, because there is no legal duty to report it, are just scooped to the side of the road. Does the Minister agree that this is something that we should do to bring parity to cats and dogs when it comes to safety on the road?

Daniel Zeichner: This is an issue that has been widely discussed. Our advice is that it would be difficult to enforce in practice, but I fully recognise the distress and concern that it causes.

Agriculture Sector: Growth

7. **Edward Morello** (West Dorset) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to help support growth in the agriculture sector. [902599]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The Secretary of State set out our vision to boost farmers' profitability and sustainability in our plan for change when he spoke to the 2025 Oxford farming conference. That includes a cast-iron commitment to food security, a £5 billion agricultural budget over the next two years, a boost to profitability by making the supply chain fairer and protecting farmers in trade deals.

Edward Morello: Farmers in West Dorset are struggling with rising costs, the regulatory burden, market instability and supermarkets paying unsustainably low prices for what they produce. This forces many farmers to diversify away from food production in order to survive. Given the vital role that farming plays in both our rural economy and in food security, what specific measures will the Government introduce to stop the need for diversification and ensure that farming remains a financially viable and attractive industry for the next generation of West Dorset farmers?

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Gentleman makes an important set of points, but I point him to the speech that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made at Oxford, because he made the very strong point that farming needs to get a better return for the hard work that farmers do. Alongside that, diversification is important to allow people to get through the difficult times, which inevitably come up in a cyclical business such as farming.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): The increasing demand for biofuel feedstocks offers a huge opportunity for agriculture, particularly in feedstocks for sustainable aviation fuel. With the welcome SAF mandate and revenue certainty mechanism, there is a real chance for growth in this area, especially if we support rapid conversion at Grangemouth. What steps is the Minister taking to secure a scalable supply of feedstocks, and how he will remove barriers to their use in the production of SAF?

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, but we need to make sure that we get the right balance between producing food and using our land for other purposes. That is why it is so important that a land use framework was brought forward. We have a consultation going on for the next 12 weeks, and I am sure that he and others will contribute to it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): To have growth in agriculture we need healthy animals, and for that, farms need biosecurity. Crucial to that is the Animal and Plant Health Agency, which deserves our thanks in these challenging times. With the alarming recent foot and mouth outbreak in Germany, avian influenza again surging, bluetongue still with us and African swine fever at our doorstep, we must act urgently. Please can the Government release the further necessary £1.4 billion to redevelop the APHA headquarters in Weybridge? The programme was started under the Conservatives, with £1.2 billion committed in 2020. For the sake of agriculture, animal health, rural mental health, biosecurity and national security, please will the Minister act now?

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Gentleman makes an important set of points about the biosecurity needed to protect our country. Over the past few weeks we have had a series of questions across the Dispatch Box about the foot and mouth outbreak in Germany and avian influenza. We have had this discussion about the investment in Weybridge, and I am delighted that this Government have brought forward a £280 million investment there. Of course, we need to do more in future, but what on earth were the previous Government doing over the past 14 years?

Budget: Impact on Farmers

9. **David Reed** (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the autumn Budget 2024 on business confidence among farmers. [902601]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): The truth is that confidence among farmers has been far too low for far too long. That is why this Government are setting out the sustainable long-term plan for farming. Again, I point people to the Secretary of State's address at the Oxford farming conference. We will continue to progress our priorities over the coming weeks.

David Reed: Farmers across Devon are rightly concerned about Labour's planned changes to agricultural property relief and business property relief, particularly the serious impact on family farms and on the sustainability of rural communities. In early December I wrote to the Secretary of State to invite him to meet Devon's farming community, at an event to be organised in conjunction with the NFU in Devon, to provide clarity on the policies' objectives and to address their concerns. I am yet to receive a response. I ask him directly now: will he come to Devon, meet local farmers, and explain how these policies will not undermine their livelihoods and the future of British farming?

Daniel Zeichner: I thank the hon. Member for his question, which is one that I have been asked at the Dispatch Box many times over the past few weeks. I have been to meet farmers in Cumbria, and last week I met farmers in south Cambridgeshire. I would love to meet farmers in Devon, so I am happy to add him to the list for my grand tour across the country to reassure people that there is a strong plan to ensure that farmers have a viable future, which they did not have under the last Government.

Mr Speaker: On that point, when Ministers make such tours, I hope that they will ensure that local MPs are made aware of the fact, because that did not happen in my case.

Metal Recycling: Regulation

10. **Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve the regulation of metal recycling businesses. [902602]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): Metal recyclers are regulated by local authorities and the Environment Agency and must meet specific treatment standards. We are ensuring that online marketplaces and vape producers contribute fairly towards the cost of recycling waste electricals, including metal components, and the sale of disposable vapes will be banned from 1 June.

Alistair Strathern: Six times in the past 12 months, Hitchin has had to endure repeated fires in industrial estates often triggered by lithium-ion batteries. It is clear that we need much tougher regulations to ensure the safety of those sites and, given the inherent risk that their businesses now pose, consideration of whether a time-limited licensing scheme would better enable local authorities to ensure that their location remains appropriate with evolving land use. Will the Minister meet me to ensure that we can make progress on this important issue?

Mary Creagh: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend. Battery-related fires risk lives, livelihoods and the environment. The Environment Agency is currently reviewing approximately 2,000 metal recycling permits. The Hitchin shredder site is midway through its review, and a revised permit will be issued shortly. The Environment Agency has also produced new regulatory guidance on metal shredding and will consult on guidance for waste batteries in the spring.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In Northern Ireland we are fortunate to have fairly good regulation of metal recycling businesses. Ards and North Down borough council, for example, do that exceptionally well. Other businesses across my borough, and indeed in Belfast and further afield in Northern Ireland, do the same. I know that the Minister loves going to Northern Ireland. Has she had an opportunity to speak to the relevant Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive to discuss what we are doing to help here?

Mary Creagh: The hon. Gentleman knows my affection and my origins in County Fermanagh, the lakeland county. I would be happy to talk to Minister Muir about what we can learn in England from the good practice that seems to be happening in Northern Ireland.

Public Procurement: British Produce

11. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to encourage public bodies to purchase British produce. [902603]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): Over recent weeks we have announced a series of reforms delivering on the Government's new deal for farmers, ensuring that, in line with World Trade Organisation rules and domestic procurement rules, we can ensure that procurement is used to back British farmers.

Bill Esterson: Farmers and growers in my constituency want to sell to hospitals and schools, but over the past few years they have found that increasingly difficult, not least because of the procurement chapters in the trade agreements that were concluded by the Conservative Government. Will my hon. Friend confirm that, under this Government, growers and farmers will be able to sell to public bodies and play their part in keeping Britain fed?

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; there is a real opportunity here, with £5 billion of purchasing power in the public sector, so we are looking at ways of ensuring that happens. It was a real surprise for us to find that the previous Government had not even measured the amount that was being bought—that is the starting point. We will start to make that happen, and we will get that huge opportunity for British farmers.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): I welcome the Government's focus in this area. One of the barriers that small agricultural businesses in my constituency face in supplying the public sector is the complexity of the contracting process. The Crown Commercial Service made significant improvements to its portal last year, but I urge the ministerial team to build on that progress to make it easier, particularly for small companies, to provide food to the public sector. Ultimately, we all want to see more of that.

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman not only for his question, but for his interest in and attendance at DEFRA questions—we are honoured to have him here. I am very happy to look at what he suggests and to work towards making those proposals work. We know that it is complicated within World Trade Organisation rules, but there is a real prize to be had here.

Topical Questions

T1. [902607] **Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): The first role of any Government is to protect their citizens. Yesterday we announced that we are committing a record £2.65 billion to build and maintain around 1,000 flood defences, to protect lives, homes and businesses—a 26% uplift per annum on what the previous Government were spending. We are immediately using £140 million to unblock over 30 projects that are ready for delivery but stalled under the previous Government.

We are launching a consultation to update the funding formula so that we can speed up new schemes and ensure that rural and coastal communities are properly included. The previous Government left our flood defences in the worst condition ever recorded. This Government will put them right.

Darren Paffey: Levels of *E. coli* and faecal matter in the River Itchen remain disgustingly high. I commend the Friends of the Itchen Estuary group for their work to highlight the issue. Like me, they want designated bathing water status in order to protect the river, so will the Secretary of State update us on when that application process will open again and on what changes we can expect?

Steve Reed: I pay tribute to the Friends of the Itchen Estuary for their advocacy on this important issue. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ran a consultation on reforms to the Bathing Water Regulations 2013, which closed on 23 December 2024. We are currently analysing the responses and considering how any proposed changes may impact the application and designation process, and we will of course respond fully in due course.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): The head of the Dover Port Health Authority warned the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee this week that if funding is not secured with seven weeks, food security checks at the border will be stopped. That will mean unchecked and potentially dangerous meat appearing on supermarket shelves and in restaurants at a time when there is foot and mouth disease in Germany. When will the Secretary of State protect our borders and confirm that funding?

Steve Reed: The National Farmers Union and other interested parties have quite rightly raised concerns about the discovery of foot and mouth disease in Germany. We are relieved that there has not been a further spread of that outbreak, but we are taking all appropriate measures at the border to ensure that this country remains safe in terms of biosecurity, and we will continue to monitor the situation and take appropriate action to ensure that there can be no repeat of what happened around 20 years ago, when a foot and mouth outbreak in this country devastated farming and cost the economy a total of £14 billion.

Victoria Atkins: I do not think the Secretary of State either understood my question or knows the answer, because I asked him when he will confirm the funding. Compare this relaxed approach with the Prime Minister's seeming desperation to pay more than the entire DEFRA budget to surrender the Chagos islands. Does the Secretary of State really support taxing British farming families for dying, slashing winter fuel payments for rural pensioners, and hiking taxes on rural businesses to pay £9 billion to a foreign Government on some dodgy legal advice from Labour lawyers?

Steve Reed: If the shadow Secretary of State really cared about value for money, she would not have wasted £500,000 on relocating her office in the Department of Health, a project that was purely about her own personal vanity.

T2. [902608] **Lorraine Beavers** (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): The people of Fleetwood, Thornton and beyond have suffered from toxic stench for the past 12 months. Last night was extremely unpleasant, with residents reporting nosebleeds, breathing problems, headaches and vomiting this morning. The stench is due to the mismanagement of the local Jameson Road landfill site. Despite multiple interventions by the Environment Agency, including a six-week closure, the smell is now as bad as ever, if not worse.

Mr Speaker: Order. These are topical questions—please get to the question.

Lorraine Beavers: What can the Government do to ensure that the Environment Agency has much stronger powers to deal with landfill sites that bring daily misery to residents, such as those living in my constituency?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): My heart goes out to my hon. Friend's constituents, who are clearly suffering terrible public health consequences from the stink at that site. There is an ongoing investigation into the cause of odour issues that have impacted the community in Fleetwood, which escalated in January 2024. The Environment Agency has told me that it expects odour issues to reduce within the next seven days. Should that not occur, it will consider any and all appropriate regulatory interventions to reduce the impact on the community. It has also launched—

Mr Speaker: Order. We only have four minutes.

T4. [902611] **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): The area around Heathrow has breached nitrogen dioxide legal limits for years now, so what assessment has the Environment Secretary made of the impact on air quality of both the additional flights and the additional vehicles travelling to and from Heathrow as a result of a third runway?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): I thank the hon. Lady for her important question. The Government are developing a series of interventions to reduce emissions, so that everybody's exposure to air pollution is reduced. We are also conducting a comprehensive review of how we communicate air quality information, to ensure that members of the public and vulnerable groups have the information they need to protect themselves and understand the impact on air quality. Of course, no further decisions have been made regarding other developments.

T3. [902610] **Harpreet Uppal** (Huddersfield) (Lab): Too many communities, including in Huddersfield, are forced to deal with persistent fly-tipping and littering in their streets and neighbourhoods, and residents are understandably fed up with it. What support are the Government providing to local areas to ensure that they have the resources they need to prevent and tackle persistent fly-tipping?

Mary Creagh: I visited a fly-tipping site in Lichfield where people have been trapped in their homes. Fly-tipping blights communities, harms wildlife and places huge costs on taxpayers and businesses. Councils dealt with over a million incidents in 2022-23, up 10% on three years ago. I do not believe that the waste carriers, brokers and

dealers regime is fit for purpose, so I have asked officials to look at how we strengthen that regime to crack down on waste criminals.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Thoroughbred horses are high-health, high-welfare animals, and they should be treated as such to allow cross-border travel without physical border checks. Can the Minister commit today to recognise their high-health status, put welfare first and reduce this barrier to trade?

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): My near neighbour raises an important point—this is a very high-value sector. A commitment was made to designate thoroughbred horses as high-health animals as part of the border target operating model, and we will provide an update on the timeline for implementation by the end of the summer.

T5. [902612] **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras ha myttin da, Mr Speaker. Many of my constituents in Hayle have become increasingly concerned about the dredging of sand around Hayle harbour and the potential environmental damage. We desperately need a solution that works for residents and the environment and maintains our vitally important harbour. Will the Minister meet me as a matter of urgency to discuss how the Government and the Environment Agency will support all local stakeholders to establish a long-term sand management and erosion plan in Hayle?

Emma Hardy: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue and for the work he is doing in championing what is obviously a crucial issue for his residents. I would of course be happy to meet him.

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): Constituents in Witney were extremely distressed to receive letters this week from Thames Water saying that their bills are going up by £19 a month from April, putting more pressure on household bills. Does the Minister think that is acceptable, given that the restructuring plan in the High Court is putting £800 million to £900 million of interest expenses on to this company—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is sub judice, and the hon. Member should not go into the actual detail of the application before the Court at the moment. Can the Minister say anything? If not, we will have to move on.

T6. [902613] **Lee Barron** (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): Over a decade ago, planning permission was given to build an incinerator on the outskirts of Corby. That location now has thousands of houses, a school and a nursery. Frankly, it is now in the heart of the community and no longer on the outskirts. Given that the incinerator is yet to be built, does the Minister agree with me that, in the light of the crackdown on waste incinerators, the planning application should be looked at again and the incinerator moved?

Mary Creagh: It is not appropriate for me to comment on a specific planning permission case, but I do encourage those developing energy-from-waste facilities, including those that already have permission, to consider the evidence that DEFRA published over the recess, the new

standards that we have introduced and the Government's circular economy opportunities when determining whether their facility is still required.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I take the Secretary of State back to the subject of illegal meat imports? On Tuesday the Select Committee was told that at Dover this work, which covers only 20% of arrivals, is being done in live lanes, despite the fact that there is a border control post at Dover that is sitting unused, and the funding for Dover Port Health Authority is due to expire at the end of March. Can we at the very least sort out the financing of this for the next financial year?

Daniel Zeichner: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his question. The issues at Dover are significant and long-running. The funding was not resolved ahead of the general election, and there is an ongoing discussion. We are very aware of the challenges, but we are on it, and we will make sure that we are talking to those at Dover Port Health Authority.

T7. [902614] **Jacob Collier** (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): Rural communities such as Marchington, Draycot and Rolleston have been suffering from flooding for many years, with funding often going to areas with larger populations. Can the Minister set out what steps she has taken to ensure that rural communities are not left out of flood protection funding?

Emma Hardy: I thank my hon. Friend, who is right to highlight how the previous flooding formula discriminated against rural communities because it was based purely on the number of properties protected, not on creating the right solution in the right area. That is exactly why we wish to reform the formula, and we will be announcing a consultation very shortly.

Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): Given that the Office for Budget Responsibility refused to endorse the £22 billion black hole figure—in fact, it refused to say that there was any black hole at all—will the Secretary of State tell the House what possible justification there can be for the removal of agricultural property relief, which will do untold damage to the growth prospects of family farms in my constituency and across the country?

Steve Reed: The right hon. Member is fully aware of the appalling state the public finances were left in at the end of his Government. This Government have had to take very difficult decisions to balance the finances so we can get growth that will benefit the entire economy, including the farming sector, which was on its knees after 14 years of Conservative rule.

SOLICITOR GENERAL

The Solicitor General was asked—

CPS Prosecutors

1. **Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure adequate numbers of Crown Prosecution Service prosecutors. [902630]

The Solicitor General (Lucy Rigby): I would like to start by congratulating US Attorney General Pam Bondi on her confirmation yesterday. The Attorney General and I look forward to working closely with her on our long list of shared priorities.

CPS prosecutors perform vital work to serve the public and deliver justice for victims. We have taken steps to strengthen the CPS workforce, including by boosting staff numbers in specialist rape and serious sexual assault units, as well as by being tough on crime, supporting victims and restoring confidence in the criminal justice system. All these things are part of this Government's mission to make our streets safe, and the CPS has a key role to play in that mission.

Douglas McAllister: Will the Solicitor General join me in welcoming this Government's increased funding of the Crown Prosecution Service for specialist sexual offence prosecution units? Does she agree that we must continue to tackle violence against women and girls across our nation, and will she join me in paying tribute to the dedication of our prosecutors and police on the front line who are confronting these crimes?

The Solicitor General: Absolutely; I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to police and prosecutors not only in his constituency, but right across the United Kingdom. He is right to welcome the increased funding that we have secured for the CPS. Our recently agreed settlement will ensure that the CPS can recruit more specialist prosecutors, delivering that vital work and putting those who commit these abhorrent crimes behind bars.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Given the backlog in Crown court appearances, and the increasing tide of knife crime as well as criminal activity against women and girls, what steps are the Department taking to ensure that the Crown Prosecution Service is adequately provided for so that justice is seen to be done in the wider community?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member makes an important point; this Government are working very hard to do that. The settlement for the CPS that I referred to was an extra £49 million, and it is spending some of that on increasing the number of prosecutors who are able to do the important work to which he refers.

Violence against Women and Girls: Prosecution Rates

2. **Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to help increase prosecution rates for cases involving violence against women and girls. [902631]

11. **Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to help increase prosecution rates for cases involving violence against women and girls. [902641]

The Solicitor General: The scale of violence against women and girls in this country is intolerable, and the Government are treating it as the national emergency that it is. The CPS has begun securing convictions of offenders who breach domestic abuse protection orders—a scheme that the Government introduced in November 2024 in order better to protect victims of domestic abuse. Although there is much more to be done, that is

just one example of the clear action that the Government are taking to meet our mission to halve violence against women and girls in a decade.

Maya Ellis: The national conviction rate for domestic abuse cases is woefully low, standing at 4.5%, but the picture is even worse in rural constituencies such as Ribble Valley, where the overall conviction rate is only 3%. What does the Solicitor General regard as the unique challenges in rural areas, and what steps is she taking to tackle them specifically?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. She is right to highlight the unique risks faced by women in rural areas, including her constituency; increased isolation can bring with it more risk. To tackle violence against women we need to address the overall number of prosecutions, which unfortunately is still far too low. That is why, working with the CPS and the police, we have brought in the domestic abuse joint justice plan—which I am pleased to say is already leading to a modest increase in referrals of domestic abuse cases—to improve the investigation, prosecution, and handling of domestic abuse cases.

Leigh Ingham: In June 2024, 60% of rape investigations were closed because the victim dropped out. On top of that I have heard harrowing stories from my constituents who went to court over their sexual assault, and who felt humiliated and were further traumatised by that process. What work is being done to ensure that victims of sexual violence are treated with empathy and respect during the court process?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend asks a pertinent question, and I am sure the whole House will be sorry to hear of the examples that she raised. She is right to say that all victims ought to be treated with empathy and respect, because victims' loss of confidence in the criminal justice undermines the entire process of justice. I am working with the CPS to ensure better support for victims in rape and serious sexual offence cases, including by hiring victim liaison officers in teams prosecuting such cases. I had the pleasure of meeting some of those victim liaison officers while visiting the CPS in Cardiff, and I was able to hear first hand about the vital work they are doing to support victims.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): My constituency is blighted by the shocking crime of child sexual exploitation, and rebuilding trust among victims in our criminal justice system is vital if victims are to come forward. Recently, eight men from my constituency were sentenced for the horrendous gang rape of two children and received shockingly short sentences; one was as low as three years. I have written to the Attorney General on this issue. Does the Solicitor General agree that these weak sentences are hugely damaging trust in our justice system? Will she commit, via the Attorney General, to reviewing them?

The Solicitor General: The example that the hon. Member refers to is indeed heinous. The conduct of those who have been involved in such crimes has rightly shocked and appalled people right across the country. He refers to a referral to the Attorney General's Office, and it is therefore not appropriate for me to comment on that specific case further.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I have had many victims of domestic abuse write to me, following lengthy periods of inaction from the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and other organisations, which have left victims at risk and feeling horribly anxious. How will the Minister ensure that prosecution rates improve and victims have confidence in the criminal justice system?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member makes an important point. I am sorry to hear of the examples that she raises. This Government have a historic mission to halve violence against women and girls in a decade, and we are taking a series of important steps to work towards the increased number of prosecutions that she refers to. For example, we are introducing specialist rape and sexual offences teams in every police force; working to increase referrals with the recently launched domestic abuse joint justice plan; fast-tracking rape cases; and introducing free independent legal advisers for victims of adult rape. I referred earlier to domestic abuse protection orders, and the first convictions for breach of them are already being seen.

Serious Fraud Office: Economic Crime

3. **Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the Serious Fraud Office's progress on tackling economic crime. [902632]

The Solicitor General: The SFO does crucial work to tackle complex fraud, bribery and corruption. I have met senior SFO staff on multiple occasions in the past two months, and I recently visited SFO HQ to understand more about the ways it is putting the latest technology to use in tackling economic crime and returning stolen funds to victims. Under the new director of the SFO, the SFO has opened seven new overt investigations and charged 10 defendants in cases involving more than 800 victims.

Gregor Poynton: My hon. Friend will know that fraud does not stop at the border, and residents in my Livingston constituency are incredibly concerned by the increase in fraud and economic crime and the devastating effects they can have on people's lives. What are the UK Government doing to tackle fraud in Scotland?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right that fraud does not acknowledge borders, particularly when it comes to the increasing harms associated with online fraud. That is why it is so important that the SFO works closely with the Scottish law enforcement authorities. In that respect, and in others, this Government are fully committed to strengthening the Union.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Solicitor General for that reply. We in Northern Ireland understand that economic crime is used by paramilitaries to fund their organisations and criminal groups. In America, Al Capone was put in jail not for the crimes he committed, but for tax evasion and financial issues. Will the Attorney General target paramilitary groups for their efforts to raise money illegally?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member makes an important point. This Government take economic crime incredibly seriously, including when it links to the serious type of activity to which he refers.

Attorney General's Office: Transparency and Conflicts of Interest

4. **Jack Rankin** (Windsor) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase transparency in the Attorney General's Office. [902633]

6. **Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What steps she is taking to manage conflicts of interest in the Attorney General's Office. [902635]

10. **Patrick Spencer** (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): What steps she is taking to manage conflicts of interest in the Attorney General's Office. [902640]

The Solicitor General: The Attorney General's Office has a rigorous process for identifying and dealing with conflicts and potential conflicts that arise from Law Officers' former practice. As part of that process, the AGO adopts a cautious and beyond reproach threshold to any conflicts or potential conflicts. These arrangements are long-standing and part of a standard practice that has applied across successive Administrations.

Jack Rankin: Three former Law Officers have criticised the Attorney General for not declaring his earnings, labelling it as "irregular" and a break from "normal practice". Who is in the wrong: the three former Law Officers or the Attorney General?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member will know that the Attorney General ceased all private practice following his appointment. The hon. Member refers to fee agreements, and he will know that there are different arrangements and requirements for declarations for Members of the House of Lords and for Members of the House of Commons. It does not matter which type of fee agreement is in place between a lawyer and their client, because the entirety of those agreements—whether a conditional fee agreement, a damages-based agreement, on a fully paid basis or when acting pro bono—will always be caught by the conflicts process. The requirements for the purposes of the House of Lords are the same for all peers and they apply just as much to the shadow Attorney General as to the Attorney General.

Mr Holden: Does the Solicitor General agree with the recent Policy Exchange research paper "Conflicts of Interest and the Law Officers' Convention" authored by Dr Conor Casey, a senior lecturer at Surrey law school, and supported by three former Ministers who are all KCs, that invoking the Law Officers' convention on questions about the potential conflict of interest relating to the work of the Attorney General would be an error, as such questions do not fall within the scope of the convention?

The Solicitor General: As I have said, the Attorney General's Office has a rigorous process for identifying and dealing with conflicts and potential conflicts that arise from the Law Officers' former practice. The Law Officers' convention, to which the right hon. Member referred, exists for very good reason, which is to enable the Government of this country to receive full and frank advice. In any event, the Attorney General has been clear that he does not agree with that report. In particular, he does not agree that a Law Officer would

indicate whether they have recused themselves from a particular matter, because that in itself would breach the Law Officers' convention.

Patrick Spencer: My constituents in Central Suffolk and North Ipswich are decent, tolerant and thoughtful people, but they are left wondering how the Prime Minister has appointed an Attorney General who is a friend and a Labour party donor as well as someone who has represented Gerry Adams, Shamima Begum and Hamas and clearly has questions to answer regarding outside earnings. Does the Solicitor General think that the AG was an appropriate appointment?

The Solicitor General: Again, unfortunately the Opposition are falling into the trap of believing that barristers are their clients. That is a deliberate conflation of representation and endorsement. As the hon. Member will be fully aware, barristers are not their clients in the same way that surgeons are not their patients. That is a foundational principle of the British legal and judicial systems, and Opposition Members ought not to undermine that.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): Does the Solicitor General agree that the UK legal system is the envy of the world and a key engine for growth in our economy, and that the Conservative party risks undermining a fundamental principle of our legal system that everyone has the right to representation and that lawyers can represent their clients without fear or favour?

The Solicitor General: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. The Conservative party would do better to talk up our excellent British legal and judicial systems rather than consistently seeking to undermine the foundational principles to which he referred.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Solicitor General.

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): The Attorney General has admitted to recusing himself from certain matters; he has also maintained absolute silence about which matters those may be. In these circumstances, we must ask ourselves: is that the level of transparency that our democracy demands? What safeguards exist when the Attorney General's past clients and present duties overlap? Who, independent of the Attorney General himself, scrutinises those critical decisions on recusal, or do we face the concerning spectacle of the Government's chief legal adviser marking his own homework?

The Solicitor General: As I have outlined, the Attorney General's Office has rigorous and long-standing processes in place. Upon appointment, the AGO compiles a list of matters in which the Law Officer has previously been involved, by searching cases, cross-referencing with information obtained by the Law Officer's chambers or firm and working through the list with the Law Officer themselves. The Office works with the Government Legal Department, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Crown Prosecution Service and the Serious Fraud Office to obtain additional information and compile the final list of conflicts and actions associated with each case. As the shadow Solicitor General knows, the Attorney General cannot publish a

list of his former clients due to client confidentiality. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members groan, but client confidentiality is a fundamental principle. Absolutely ridiculous.

The shadow Solicitor General mentioned recusal. The Attorney General has already indicated in the other place that he has recused himself from matters. The Law Officers' convention prohibits me from listing those matters. No other Law Officer has ever published a list of the cases that they are recused from

Helen Grant: The Solicitor General, her predecessor and every Conservative Law Officer from the previous Administration rightly and properly understood their duty to declare previous earnings. Why does the Attorney General refuse to declare moneys received from his practice as a barrister? Why does he not acknowledge whether he continues to receive such payments when his predecessors routinely declared both? Why does this Attorney General think that there is one rule for him and another rule for everyone else?

The Solicitor General: The Attorney General is in the House of Lords, so the rules that apply are different from those that apply in the House of Commons. That is the difference between the Attorney General and the previous Solicitor General and me. Those requirements are the same for all peers, including the Attorney General, and they apply just as much to the shadow Attorney General. The Lords Commissioners for Standards said that they considered the complaints made by the shadow Justice Secretary about the peers code of conduct, and dismissed them.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is past 10.30 am and we need to get through some more questions.

Devolved Administrations

5. John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Whether she has had meetings with her counterparts in the devolved Administrations since taking office. [902634]

The Solicitor General: This Government are committed to strengthening relations with devolved Governments and fostering greater collaboration, built on mutual respect and trust. As the hon. Member would expect, the Law Officers very regularly meet our counterparts to discuss our shared priorities.

John Lamont: The Scottish National party's deposit return scheme was a complete shambles, which the last Conservative Government stopped, preventing it from hurting Scottish businesses with more regulation and higher costs. The SNP Government are now facing legal action over the scheme, with businesses seeking hundreds of millions of pounds in compensation. I appreciate that the Solicitor General cannot comment on a live case, but will she confirm that the SNP Government will be solely responsible for any costs that may be incurred in handling the case?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member is right that I cannot comment on the specific matter that he raises, but I am happy to look at it and to write to him.

Criminal Justice System: Use of Technology

7. **Sarah Coombes** (West Bromwich) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of the use of technology to improve efficiency in the criminal justice system. [902636]

The Solicitor General: New technology has the potential to bring transformative benefits to the criminal justice system, as it does to public services more broadly. With regard to artificial intelligence, both the CPS and the SFO are keen to explore the efficiency opportunities that this new technology can bring, while being mindful of ethical considerations.

Sarah Coombes: We have seen a sickening rise in predators using AI technology to generate child sexual abuse images. I am glad that the Government recently announced measures to close the loopholes in this area, but will the Solicitor General assure us that the whole criminal justice system is using every new technology and AI, as well as tough sentences, to crack down on it and protect children and victims of this horrific abuse?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to raise this extremely important point. That is exactly why I welcome the Home Secretary's announcement that this Government will be the first in the world to make it illegal to possess, create or distribute AI tools designed to generate child sexual abuse material, punishable by up to five years in prison.

Rural Crime: Prosecution Rates

8. **Dave Robertson** (Lichfield) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure increased prosecution rates for rural crime. [902638]

The Solicitor General: The Government are committed to keeping everyone in this country safe, whether they live in a town, a city or a rural area. That is why we are putting more police officers and police community support officers on the beat, and it is why we have bolstered the Crown Prosecution Service's workforce. With specific regard to rural crime, we are committed to implementing the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023, and to the continued funding of the national rural crime unit.

Dave Robertson: As I am sure the Solicitor General knows, fly-tipping is the most commonly reported rural crime. In 2022-23, the last year for which there is full data, there were well over 13,000 significant multi-load incidents; I use the phrase specifically, as it is an internal description. Those incidents cost more than £4 million to clear up, yet just 22 custodial sentences were handed out in that time. What assurances can she give me and my constituents that the most egregious examples of fly-tipping, like those we saw in Lichfield two weeks ago, will result in jail time for the perpetrators?

The Solicitor General: Fly-tipping blights communities, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the issue. I know that he has also raised it with the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs, but I am happy to arrange a meeting with his local chief Crown prosecutor to discuss the matter further.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): The tragic hit-and-run case of Ryan Saltern in my rural North Cornwall constituency, as well as many other cases across the country, highlights a concerning problem in our legal system. The driver failed to stop, render aid at the scene, or even call 999, leaving Ryan for dead. The case was heard in a magistrates court, where the driver received a four-month suspended sentence. Ryan's parents, Helen and Mark, and sister Leanne have campaigned tirelessly on the issue. Will the Solicitor General please look into the issue in conjunction with the CPS and the Department for Transport, and meet me to discuss her findings?

The Solicitor General: This is a profoundly tragic case, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising it. My heartfelt condolences go to Ryan's family. I know that they and others have been campaigning for changes to the law in this area, and supporting families who have been through similarly tragic circumstances. I will discuss the case that the hon. Member raises with my colleagues in the Ministry of Justice and ensure that he receives a full response.

Hate Crime Prosecution

9. **Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): What steps she is taking to help ensure the effective prosecution of people who commit hate crime. [902639]

The Solicitor General: Whether online or in person, stirring up hatred or inciting violence will not be tolerated. The Government are determined to take swift and robust action to stamp out hate crime, and perpetrators will face the full force of the law.

Tom Gordon: February marks LGBT History Month, and last night, many people came together in Speaker's House to hear about the progress that has been made in tackling hate crime against the LGBT community. Will the Solicitor General outline what steps have been taken to ensure that trans people in particular feel safe, and that perpetrators of hate crimes towards trans people are brought to justice?

The Solicitor General: The CPS prosecutes all cases that are referred to it, provided that they meet the full code test for Crown prosecutors. I think we would all admit that there is more to do regarding the incidents to which the hon. Member refers. The CPS and police national hate crime leads are committed to joint working to increase the number of police referrals to the CPS for hate crime offences.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): The criminal legal aid advisory board has asked the Government to raise fees in rape and serious sexual offences cases to address the shortage of advocates. Prosecutors often earn 30% to 40% less than defence barristers in the same case. Does the Solicitor General think that she should have a look at fees to ensure that there is not a shortage of advocates, particularly in these serious cases?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to identify this as a problem. I know from discussions with RASSO charities in my constituency that the shortage of counsel is a direct contributor to cases being adjourned or delayed. It contributes to the unfortunate slow pace

of justice, and to victim attrition. Ministers in the Ministry of Justice have committed to work with the Bar leadership via the criminal legal aid advisory board, and to look at longer-term reform of legal aid.

Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

10.40 am

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Foreign Secretary to make a statement on the situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important matter, and for the urgent question being granted. The whole House will be well aware that for the people of Gaza, so many of whom have lost lives, homes or loved ones, the last 14 months of conflict have been a living nightmare.

The UK is clear that we must see a negotiated two-state solution, with a sovereign Palestinian state which includes the west bank and Gaza, alongside a safe and secure Israel, with Jerusalem as the shared capital. That has been the framework for peace for decades. Our priority remains ensuring the fragile ceasefire continues, that all the hostages are released, that much-needed aid gets into Gaza and that we can rebuild that pathway to sustainable peace. Palestinians must determine the future of Gaza, with support from regional states and the wider international community.

We would oppose any effort to move Palestinians in Gaza to neighbouring Arab states against their will. There must be no forced displacement of Palestinians, nor any reduction in the territory of the Gaza strip. Palestinian civilians should be able to return to and rebuild their homes and their lives. That is a right guaranteed under international law. Gaza is home to 2 million Palestinians and remains an integral part of what must become a future Palestinian state, with Palestinians living next to Israelis in peace and security. The US has played a critical role in negotiating the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas, alongside Qatar and Egypt. As hon. Members may know, the Prime Minister reiterated that in his call with President Trump. We must now work together to ensure the ceasefire is implemented in full and becomes permanent.

The UK is investing in the ceasefire by doing all it can to support the surge in aid that is needed. Alongside our existing support, on 28 January I announced a further £70 million in funding to ensure healthcare, food and shelter reaches tens of thousands of civilians, and to support vital infrastructure across the Occupied Palestinian Territories and neighbouring countries.

We are also concerned at the expansion of the Government of Israel's war aims and operations in the west bank. Stability is essential at this crucial time. We recognise Israel's right to defend itself and the continuing threat posed by armed groups, but it must show restraint and ensure the scale and conduct of its operations are commensurate to the threat posed. Civilians must be protected and the destruction of civilian infrastructure minimised. The UK remains opposed to illegal settlements, their expansion and settler violence.

In conclusion, our attention must now turn to how we secure a permanently better future for the Israeli and Palestinian peoples, grounded—to reiterate the point a final time—in a two-state solution.

Andy McDonald: I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement.

The context in which we approach this question is following 16 months of bloodshed and the deaths of almost 50,000 Palestinians, and a welcome temporary ceasefire. So the remarks of the US President, in conference with the Israeli Prime Minister, that the US will

“take over the Gaza Strip”

to create a

“Riviera of the Middle East”

and that

“1.8 million Palestinians living in Gaza”

should live in “other countries”, are reckless and dangerous. That has emboldened the Israeli Defence Minister Katz overnight to further propose the displacement of Palestinians from Gaza. The remarks are generating fear and tension in the Palestinian population, and across the middle east—as evidenced by the statements of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and others—and will cause concern and more determined demonstrations in the UK.

The US President has also restored arms shipments, ended funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, and withdrawn from the UN Human Rights Council. Netanyahu says that Israel will redraw the map, and the Israeli Defence Forces have detonated whole streets in the Jenin refugee camp in the west bank. In such dangerous circumstances we should be careful, calculated and accurate in our use of language. Forced displacement of the type advocated, which has already occurred within the Gaza strip, is a breach of international humanitarian rights and a war crime. Advocating the expulsion of a people is also justly described as ethnic cleansing, and can only be achieved through yet further appalling violence. I acknowledge that the Government will wish to maintain their diplomatic relationship with the US, as a long-standing friend, but it is the role of friends to be honest with each other, and the UK must use its influence.

The Prime Minister's remark yesterday that the Palestinians “must be allowed home” is most welcome, but the Government must go further. Will the Minister say that the UK rejects the President's remarks, and those of the Israeli Prime Minister and Defence Minister? Will she confirm that recognition of the Palestinian state is an urgent necessity in resolving the conflict? Will she confirm that the borders of that state are the 1967 borders set out in UN Security Council resolution 242? Finally, when will the UK Government respond to the International Court of Justice advisory opinion on the Israeli occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his many points. Of course, he is right to underline the appalling suffering that so many Gazans have experienced over recent months. We also recognise the suffering of the hostages and their families. This has been a truly horrendous time for Gazans, Palestinians and Israelis. The ceasefire must be held to, not just in phase 1, but in phases 2 and 3, and ultimately we must see a two-state solution.

My hon. Friend talks about the role of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. I reassure him that the UK continues to work with all partners in the region towards peace, which is so important. He mentioned UNRWA. I am

[Anneliese Dodds]

sure he is aware of the UK Government's position: we believe that UNRWA must continue to operate, not just in Gaza but on the west bank and, in relation to Palestinian refugees, in the region more broadly. He also mentioned the situation in Jenin. We have been very clear: there must be de-escalation. We are deeply concerned about the potential for further instability because of recent developments.

In my hon. Friend's primary question around displacement, he referred to the Prime Minister's statement yesterday. The Prime Minister could not have been clearer in what he said; like so many of us, was moved by

"the image of thousands of Palestinians literally walking through the rubble to try to find their homes and their communities in Gaza. They must be allowed home. They must be allowed to rebuild, and we should be with them in that rebuild on the way to a two-state solution."—[*Official Report*, 5 February 2025; Vol. 761, c. 745.]

The UK's position has been crystal clear. I do not believe that there is any confusion around it, and I appreciate that my hon. Friend was not suggesting that there was.

My hon. Friend asked about the UK's position on recognition. He will be aware that we have stated that position a number of times in the House, including at length in the statement by the Foreign Secretary on the ceasefire deal when that was agreed. We are very clear: the Palestinians have the right, just as the Israelis do, to their own sovereign state where they can live in security. We are determined to ensure that recognition at the time when that is most conducive to achieving a two-state solution, which is the right of both those peoples.

Finally, on the subject of the ICJ, my hon. Friend will be aware that the Court's determination is a very detailed judgment, which it took many months to come to. As behoves such a judgment, it is important that the Government consider it in detail. That is exactly what we are doing, and we will update colleagues as soon as we have come to a determination on that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The ceasefire remains fragile. There continues to be a long road ahead. We want the agreement to hold, and that means that each and every hostage must be released, in accordance with the terms of phase 1 of the agreement, and the subsequent phases.

The videos we have all watched of the released hostages being reunited with their families are immensely moving. We cannot even begin to imagine the pain that they have suffered since 7 October 2023. We also hold firmly in our thoughts the hostages who remain in cruel captivity at the hands of Hamas, and the families who continue to anxiously await news of their loved ones. The awful news that eight hostages will not make it home alive must be unbearable for the families.

We reiterate our call for the Government to do everything in their power, with partners, to push for humanitarian access to those who are still being held hostage. The UK should offer whatever practical support it can to facilitate the smooth release of hostages. The testimony of Emily Damari about the location of her captivity is also very serious, and a thorough and independent investigation

is urgently needed. I would be grateful for clarity from the Minister on how the UK Government are formally responding, beyond calls for an investigation.

On the subject of aid to Gaza, can the Minister give us an update on three points? First, what is the turnaround time for British aid—the time between it reaching warehouses in the region and its entering Gaza? Secondly, what metrics, if any, are the Government using to monitor the distribution of that aid when it has entered Gaza? Finally, since the ceasefire, have additional types and categories of aid been delivered?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for all her questions, but also for the concern that she expressed about the situation of the remaining hostages and their families. When I was in Tel Aviv, I had the privilege of meeting the brother of Emily Damari, as well as other hostage families, and obviously their suffering has been extreme. As the right hon. Lady said, it has been particularly harrowing for the families of the eight hostages who have died. I know that the whole House will recognise the pain and suffering that has been undergone by the very large number of Gazans who have lost their lives. A great many people are, of course, unaccounted for. For many of us, the situation is unimaginable, as we try to put ourselves in the shoes of those returning to their former homes, in some cases trying to find out whether their family members are under the rubble. What a horrific experience they must be going through.

The right hon. Lady asked three questions, with which I will deal in a moment, but she also rightly pressed me on the issue of Emily Damari's captivity and the allegations that she had been held in UNRWA facilities. Commissioner Lazzarini, the head of UNRWA, has said that claims that hostages were held in UNRWA premises are "disturbing", and I agree with him. I welcome UNRWA's call for independent investigation of any misuse of its facilities, and indeed there have been investigations previously: the Colonna review investigated other allegations, and the UK has worked with UNRWA to ensure that those investigations were thorough, and that the appropriate changes were made.

Let me turn to the right hon. Lady's questions. She asked about the turnaround times for UK aid getting into Gaza. Certainly we have seen a far speedier throughput, but I am sure that she would agree that we need to see commercial shipments of goods getting into Gaza; that is necessary if there is to be delivery of food and other supplies on the scale that is required. We continue to push the Government of Israel to enable that to happen as quickly as possible. As for the metrics being used when it comes to the distribution of that aid, we are working closely with trusted partners, and as the right hon. Lady would expect, we continuously monitor the distribution of UK supplies. Much of our activity has been undertaken jointly with other countries, as well as with UN agencies, and we work closely with them to ensure that aid is delivered where it is needed.

Lastly, the right hon. Lady asked whether there had been a change in types of aid. We need access for tents in particular, as well as other forms of shelter and medical supplies. When I was in Jordan, I saw medical supplies that it had not been possible to deliver to Gaza, and we need access for those. We have seen improvements in some areas, but given the scale of the challenge, we

need to see further improvements, especially in relation to water and sanitation where there has been a great deal of destruction. Urgent action is needed to improve the position.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: To those Members who were seven minutes late, please do not embarrass each other by standing.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): We have seen a really worrying escalation of violence on the west bank, just at the time when this fragile peace has been found in Gaza. Large parts of Jenin refugee camp have been completely destroyed by Israeli security forces, and thousands have been forcibly displaced. UNRWA services have been interrupted. What measures is the Minister taking to ensure that Palestinians can live safely and securely in their homes on the west bank?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. She has considerable expertise in the area of humanitarian support, as do many other Members in the Chamber. As I said in my previous response, the UK is very concerned about the situation in Jenin, which we continue to monitor very carefully. We are clear that peace and stability on the west bank is in everyone's interests—it is in the state of Israel's interests, and in the interests of Palestinians. On 18 December, in a statement at the UN Security Council meeting on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the UK called on Israel to stop illegal settlement expansion on Palestinian land, and we are considering all options for taking further action.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): President Trump's proposals for the forced displacement of Gaza's 2.2 million inhabitants would constitute a grave violation of international law, and threaten the fragile ceasefire and the return of the hostages. Will the Minister condemn them?

The Palestinian people have a right to self-determination and to a state of their own, as has been British policy for decades, so will the Government finally commit to an immediate recognition of a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders? The welcome ceasefire has given us the opportunity to flood Gaza with aid, but the freeze to US aid funding is reportedly impacting the humanitarian response; non-governmental organisations are being forced to lay off aid workers. What has the impact been on the humanitarian response in Gaza, including on British-funded programmes, and what conversations are the Government having with our American partners to persuade them that abolishing US aid would be a dire mistake?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the important points she raised. The UK's position on the right to return could not be clearer. I quoted the Prime Minister's remarks, which were most definitely that Palestinians must be allowed to go back to their homes and communities in Gaza, and must be allowed to rebuild. That is in line with international law. There is no doubt whatsoever about the UK's position on this.

The hon. Lady asked about the position on recognition. I responded to that when answering my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy

McDonald). The UK has been clear that we believe it is important that both Palestinians and Israelis have the sovereignty that is required for them, and the security that is necessary in order to live in peace. We will ensure that the UK's decision on recognition is a contribution to the process towards a two-state solution, which we desperately need to see.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked about US aid. I was grateful to her and other Members for coming to our briefing yesterday with the Minister for the middle east, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), in which we covered this matter. The UK notes the US decision to pause foreign aid funding for three months, pending a review. There has been a lot of commentary about that. It is a fast-moving situation, and we are monitoring it very closely indeed, as the hon. Lady would expect. Of course, this is a matter for the United States. The UK is very clear that we must continue to do what we can to support people in Gaza, must provide life-sustaining support, and must work with a whole range of partners on this, and we will continue to do so.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): Vast swathes of infrastructure in Gaza have been destroyed. What work are the Government undertaking on supporting the Palestinian people to rebuild their homes and communities, as is their right under international law?

Anneliese Dodds: This is a critical issue. Of course, we need the ceasefire to be held to. As I said, we have to move through phase 1 to phases 2 and 3, but we also need to ensure that there is day-after-next-phase planning in Gaza, so that we can see the building up of Gaza's governance and security institutions and, of course, infrastructure, as my hon. Friend rightly stated. We are clear that Gaza's recovery and reconstruction must be Palestinian-led. We have supported the Palestinian Authority in particular on this. I am very proud that UK expertise has been supporting that work, so that this important reconstruction can continue at the required pace and scale, but we need to see the ceasefire holding to enable that.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): What practical support are the Government giving to Egypt now that the Rafah crossing has reopened for medical emergencies? When that happened previously, it put enormous pressure on the Egyptian health service and caused some civil unrest in Egypt. As the right hon. Lady knows, Egypt is also under pressure on its southern border due to the conflict in Sudan. Does she agree that support for Egypt at this critical time is very important?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for underlining Egypt's role in this incredibly difficult humanitarian situation, and particularly in relation to medical evacuees from Gaza. He is also right to underline that Egypt is now housing many refugees from Sudan too.

I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that the UK is seeking to work with Egypt. We have supported the Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population with £1 million, delivered through WHO Egypt, to support medically evacuated Palestinians from Gaza. We are exploring further support for the Egyptian system, which is gearing up to receive large numbers of medical evacuees.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The world is watching, so let us be clear in this House that the UK's reaction to this brazen attempt to further rip up international law will echo for generations. With 61,000 Palestinians killed, the ceasefire hanging by a thread, and now a blueprint to ravage Gaza, ethnically cleanse Palestinians and resettle the land, where exactly have diplomacy and refusing to sanction Israel led us? Palestinians are now facing mass expulsion, reoccupation and resettlement, all while the international rules-based order has been ripped to shreds.

Anneliese Dodds: I believe it has been incredibly important for the UK to engage diplomatically in relation to this conflict. It is absolutely right that we have sought to work with partners on these issues, that we have supported statements within the UN Security Council, that we have worked with partners in the region, that we have sought to achieve change, and that we sought to ensure the ceasefire was agreed.

We need to see more hostages released, we need a surge of aid into Gaza and, ultimately, we need to work with other countries towards the two-state solution that is so necessary. I believe our work has been important, and I believe that Members would not have forgiven the UK Government if we had not engaged determinedly with those actions.

My hon. Friend asks about the UK's position, particularly on the right to return. We have stated very clearly, including at the highest level with the Prime Minister's statement yesterday, that those who are walking through the rubble to get back to their homes and communities in Gaza must be allowed home. Of course, in saying that, the Prime Minister is restating international law.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Does the Minister accept that we got here after 16 months of weakness and vacillation by both this Government and the previous Government? As we contemplate the hundreds of thousands of people who are returning to their homes to dig out their relatives from under the rubble, the welcome return of the hostages, and the 40,000-odd orphans—and even more amputees—does she recognise that the hot air we have heard from both Governments, frankly, got us to a situation in which the Israelis are demolishing buildings in Jenin with people still inside and in which the President of the United States is openly contemplating the forcible transfer of Palestinians?

If the right hon. Lady accepts that vacillation, will she confirm a couple of things for the avoidance of doubt? First, are Arabs, and Palestinians in particular, entitled to the same protections under international law as everybody else? Secondly, do we still affirm our support for UN Security Council resolution 3236, which guarantees the Palestinians' safety, security and sovereignty in their own land? If so, when will she stop just talking about it and actually take action to enforce these matters in law?

Anneliese Dodds: As the right hon. Member is aware and as we have discussed previously, this UK Government have taken a different approach from the previous Government on matters of accountability. We were very clear that the UK's arms export regime had to be held to and operated in line with international humanitarian law. That underwrote the decisions we took in the autumn:

we said we would examine that regime and deliver on it, and we examined that regime and suspended a number of licences. He is also aware about the new UK Government's different position on the legitimacy of the International Criminal Court, the International Court of Justice and UNRWA, and he is aware that we resumed funding for UNRWA.

I do not want to labour the point because so many hon. Members want to ask questions, but it is important that the UK has engaged in diplomacy and sought to work with our partners. I believe hon. Members would expect the UK Government to do that and to engage with the UN on these matters, rather than to walk away. I would underline that international law is universal: it must be—that is its founding principle. It operates regardless of circumstance or which population and individuals we are talking about. On the right hon. Member's last point, we have been very clear about the right to return.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): The television footage of many thousands of Palestinian men, women and children walking back to northern Gaza was a powerful reminder not just of the forceable displacement they have already suffered, but of the extraordinary resilience of that people. That is why there is real anger among Palestinians today that, yet again, the very existence of their homeland is being subject to the whims of another colonial power. I am pleased that the Minister has confirmed that the UK has an unshakable policy on the right of return of those Palestinians, to rebuild their homes and their lives, but would she agree with the UN Secretary-General, who said today that staying true to international law is

“essential to avoid any form of ethnic cleansing.”?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for again raising the images that so many of us have seen on our television screens of Palestinians returning to their homes in Gaza. As the Prime Minister explained, in many cases they have no choice but to walk back to their homes because of the destruction of roads and other infrastructure, but many of those homes have been destroyed. My hon. Friend is right that the experience of displacement has been felt by very significant numbers of Gazans: up to 90% of Gazans have been displaced at least once and some up to nine times. To underline yet another time, the UK's commitment to international law is very clear. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have restated that, and I restate it again today.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I am grateful to the Minister for her response to my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) on USAID, and grateful to know that the impact assessment of the US Government's decision about USAID is ongoing, particularly in relation to the humanitarian situation in Gaza. As part of that assessment, should the Government consider a return to 0.7% of gross national income for overseas development assistance? If the US is no longer a reliable global partner, then surely the UK should be.

Anneliese Dodds: On a return to 0.7% of GNI being spent on overseas development, the hon. Lady will be aware that my party's position—the position of the Government—is that we are determined to return to

that level of spending as fiscal circumstances allow. We are clear that we must play a part in humanitarian questions and, more broadly on development, we must seek to work in partnership with other countries. We are doing that and have ensured that has fed into our decisions for next year's one-year spending review, and that will be the case for the longer-term spending review as well.

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): The Prime Minister was quite clear when he said at that Dispatch Box that the right of Gazans to return and remain on their land is absolute. As they return, there are many hundreds of thousands of psychologically and physically damaged children, which is unprecedented in recent memory. What can we, the British state, do to help them?

Anneliese Dodds: I know that my hon. Friend will be concerned about this issue given his considerable medical expertise. The UK has been acting to ensure that we are doing our part to support children in Gaza, and we will continue to do so. We are having urgent discussions with our partners on this, and those discussions extend to the concerning issues around psychosocial trauma that has been experienced by children and ensuring that those vulnerable children receive the support that they need in the future.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is welcome news that some hostages have been released, but the shocking scenes that we have seen of brave young women surrounded by terrorists demonstrate that Hamas are still in charge in Gaza. The question now turns to how we ensure that the Palestinian people can return to safe and secure homes, that the terror tunnels are destroyed and that Hamas play no part in the governance of Gaza. Given that Hamas are in charge, and that President Trump has made an announcement about how all this could be done, what will the British Government do to come up with a counter proposal that is both reasonable and achievable?

Anneliese Dodds: I share the hon. Member's concern about those scenes, and I am sure that other Members in the House do so as well. The UK Government have been very clear: Hamas must not play a part in those future governance arrangements. We have been seeking to work in a practical manner with the Palestinian Authority, especially making sure that they have the expertise that they need for their reform programme and working towards the reconstruction and recovery that is so important in Gaza.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): The Minister is right to say that the past 14 months in Gaza have been a living nightmare and that we need a safe and secure Palestine alongside a safe and secure Israel. I agree absolutely that there must be no forced displacement of Gazans. Will the Minister say more about how we are focusing on the key issue here, which is how the UK is supporting a ceasefire and the rebuilding of Gaza?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her important question. The UK has sought to invest in the ceasefire. That was the reason why, just last week, we announced additional humanitarian support and

support in relation to much-needed services in Gaza, so that we could ensure that that surge in aid, which is so necessary, is not just there now, but sustained. That is important, so that we can progress from phase 1 of the ceasefire to phase 2, then phase 3, and ultimately towards a two-state solution.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): No amount of rowing back by the US State Department can change the fact that what the United States President intimated earlier this week amounts to ethnic cleansing. Are the UK Government of the same view that, if prosecuted, his plan would amount to ethnic cleansing? If not, what do the UK Government understand ethnic cleansing to be? I have heard an awful lot of warm words from the Government and ambition about what we believe in, what we stand for and what we have delivered around the immediate humanitarian crisis, but let us not forget that the horrors that have happened over the past 18 months are due to the vacuum created by international inaction over the plight of the Palestinians for the last 50 years. What will this Government do to change that drastic situation?

Anneliese Dodds: A few moments ago, I listed the decisions that the UK Government have taken that were different from those of the previous Government. We have been determined to ensure that we are very clear about the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice. We have also removed that ban on UNWRA funding, and supported moves at the UN, through the Security Council, that have been specifically focused on trying to push forward the two-state solution that is so important. I refer the hon. Gentleman to my previous remarks about the Prime Minister himself underlining the importance of that right to return.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): Yesterday, we welcomed the Prime Minister's comments about how the Palestinians must be allowed home and must be allowed to rebuild. We should be with them in that rebuild and on the way to a two-state solution, yet settler violence against Palestinians continues to increase. Will the Minister confirm that this Government have no intention of lifting the sanctions that the UK has imposed on Israeli settlers and settler groups, and will the Government even consider expanding them?

Anneliese Dodds: My hon. Friend will be aware that the UK has imposed—I believe it was in the autumn—sanctions against those who had engaged in and promoted violence as settlers. We condemn that activity and believe that it reduces the prospect of a two-state solution. Of course, for me to talk about future sanctions designations from the Dispatch Box would reduce their efficacy, and therefore I will not do that here.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I thank the Minister for the clarity of her answers today. We are all aware that Iran played a major role through its antisemitic regime in funding Hamas and Hezbollah, with the stated aim of destroying the state of Israel. If there is to be faith in the reconstruction of Gaza, people who want to do that will have to have faith that there is a secure situation. The attitude of this White House towards Iran is different from the previous one. What

[Sir Alec Shelbrooke]

action are the Government taking and how are they involved in ensuring that Iran is not able to re-establish itself to fund and arm the groups that specifically want to destroy the state of Israel?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for his comments. The UK Government are clear that Iran has long destabilised the middle east. That has obviously been done through military means, but it has also given financial and political support to its proxies and partners, including Iranian-aligned militia groups in Iraq and Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, which he mentioned, and the Houthis in Yemen. We will continue to work with international partners to encourage de-escalation. Long-term peace and security in the middle east cannot be achieved without addressing Iran's destabilising activity—the UK Government are clear on that.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Trump has lifted the lid on Israel's real plan: the ethnic cleansing—the forced displacement—of Palestinians. Nobody can claim any longer that they did not know or do not know what is going on: a genocide. All the warm words in the world about a two-state solution will not stop it; only sanctions will, as the world's top court demands. That means bans on Israeli settlement goods entering this country. It means sanctions on trade and an arms embargo. Without doing that, people in this House will never be able to say that we did everything we could to stop these crimes that will echo down the generations. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will finally treat Israel as they have rightly treated Russia and impose widespread sanctions?

Anneliese Dodds: On my hon. Friend's question about forced displacement, I was very clear earlier about the fact that the UK Government are absolutely determined to ensure that there is not forced displacement. That would be contrary to international law. Gazans must be allowed home and, in the words of the Prime Minister himself,

“must be allowed to rebuild”.—[*Official Report*, 5 February 2025; Vol. 761, c. 745.]

My hon. Friend asked about the situation in relation to arms exports. He will be aware that on 2 September we suspended a number of export licences to Israel for use in military operations in Gaza, and I refer him to my previous response on sanctions designations.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): President Trump's comments earlier this week were grossly irresponsible and dangerous. Does the Minister recognise that forcible displacement of a population under occupation constitutes ethnic cleansing and is a war crime? Will she clearly and unequivocally condemn the remarks of President Trump? Will she recognise the state of Palestine, as an essential step to the long-term sustainable peace that she has articulated support for?

Anneliese Dodds: As I mentioned just a few seconds ago, we have been clear that any attempt to prevent Gazans from returning home to their communities, and to suggest that they must remain and be housed in other Arab states, would be contrary to international law. I am sure that the hon. Lady understands that. Not only

has she heard me say it, but she heard the Prime Minister say it yesterday, and the Foreign Secretary has said it many times.

The hon. Lady asks about our approach to recognition. I agree with her that the lever of recognition is important and will be crucial for the two-state solution, which will be so important to peace in the region. That is why the UK is so carefully considering how we go about that; we know that ultimately both Israelis and Palestinians have the right to live in sovereign states, in security, and we will ensure that our actions are as strong as possible to get us to that outcome.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I very much welcome the Minister's unequivocal commitment to a two-state solution. The Government are right to reject anything that risks undermining the ceasefire and the release of the remaining hostages. However, no top-down political solution will be sustainable unless we build trust between Israeli and Palestinian communities and support the peacebuilders of the future. The Prime Minister has committed the UK to taking a lead on an international fund for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Will the Minister provide an update on the progress that has been made on that fund?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what he said about the clarity of the UK's position. I know that he and many others in the Chamber are passionate about peacebuilding. That is an area in which the UK has a certain amount of expertise, derived from those who have been peacebuilding in Northern Ireland and other contexts, and it is important that we seek to contribute to it. Of course, the most urgent thing is to ensure that the ceasefire is held to and that we move from phase 1 to phase 2 to phrase 3. Of course, in future it will be important to do what we can to contribute to peacebuilding. He is right about the Prime Minister's announcement; we are right now considering how we can ensure that that is delivered.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Many constituents, including Maggie Gardiner, have kindly contacted me about their deep concern for the wellbeing of Dr Hussam Abu Safiya, who has been detained by the IDF. I have written to the Foreign Secretary about that, and I know that the Government have raised the issue with the Israeli authorities. What explanation has been received in those meetings, and what further work is the Foreign Secretary undertaking to obtain more details on that important case?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman's constituent for raising that important issue, which many Members and the general public are concerned about, as he says. As he rightly states, the UK Government have raised that issue with Israeli counterparts. We are concerned about the situation. We believe that there needs to be clarity on why any individuals, including medical staff, are being held. It is also crucial that the Red Cross is able to visit those who have been detained. We have made that point very forcefully.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Since the ceasefire in Gaza, there has been open warfare against civilians in the west bank, dehumanising of the whole Palestinian population, and the threat of ethnic

cleansing through a second Nakba. Surely we can expect a proportionate response from the UK Government, starting with the advisory opinion, recognition and the banning of trade with settlements.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the situation in the west bank. We are deeply concerned by the intensity of IDF military operations in the west bank, as well as by attacks from Palestinian militants. We recognise Israel's need to defend itself against security threats, but we are deeply worried about the methods that Israel has employed and about reports of civilian casualties and the destruction of civilian infrastructure. We are clear that it is in no one's interest to see further conflict and instability.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome the commitment that the Minister has given the House and the determination to show our opposition to Trump's disgraceful approach, but I am disappointed that she does not see this as the ideal moment to commit to recognising the state of Palestine. What is being done across Government to reassure the communities in this country who have suffered outrageous abuse since 7 October 2023?

Anneliese Dodds: I want to underline to the hon. Lady that, as we have made very clear, Palestinian statehood is the right of the Palestinian people—it is not in the gift of any neighbour—and is essential to the long-term security of Israel as well. The UK is working with partners to support a path to long-term peace and stability with a two-state solution.

The hon. Lady rightly raises the issue of abuse, and the UK Government of course condemn any form of abuse. We have seen a disturbing rise in antisemitism, and also in Islamophobia. All forms of hatred must be condemned and acted against, and we are working hard against that hatred, particularly through the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): How do the Government address Amnesty International's concerns that economic activities with illegal Israeli settlements contribute to both their sustainability and their growth, thus undermining Palestinians' rights, and that business enterprises involved with Israel's illegal settlements may be involved and complicit in international crimes?

Anneliese Dodds: We are very clear that Israeli efforts to undermine a two-state solution through settlement building, settler violence and punitive economic measures are unacceptable. We are aware that settlement expansion reached record levels in the past year, which was very disturbing, and of course it has been accompanied by an increase in settler violence. Our position on this issue has been clear, but I will reiterate it briefly: we know that settlements are illegal under international law. They present an obstacle to peace and threaten the physical viability of a two-state solution.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The current ceasefire is clearly welcome, but it is fragile, given that Israel seems determined to pursue a policy of expansionism. We have seen the bombings in Jenin and the expansion into southern Lebanon, as well as into

the buffer zone of the Golan heights, and Israel will only be emboldened by the irresponsible ramblings of the new US President. Does the Minister agree that we are witnessing ethnic cleansing, and can I urge the UK Government to lead at the United Nations with a new resolution for a Marshall plan to ensure the rebuilding of Gaza on the terms of the Palestinian people?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the issue of the role that the UK can play in the recovery and rebuilding of Gaza. As I mentioned, we have been working with a range of partners on that issue, seeking to support the Palestinian Authority and contributing experts to their endeavours. The World Bank has conducted an updated damage assessment; we are looking very closely at that, and seeking to work with the World Bank and other partners on this issue.

Mr Speaker: I call Ben Lake.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): Diolch, Mr Speaker. Any proposal that would oversee the forcible transfer of the entire population of Gaza would clearly constitute an egregious breach of international humanitarian law, but it would also amount to ethnic cleansing. The Government have previously emphasised the importance of a rules-based international order underpinned by adherence to international humanitarian law, but how do they hope to defend and strengthen that order when yet another permanent member of the United Nations Security Council seems intent on dismantling it?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his words, and for making it clear that the UK Government do indeed support a rules-based international order. That is critical to international law, including international humanitarian law, as we have been discussing. We have repeatedly made that position clear, and we will continue to hold to it, including within the UN and with all of our partners.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We know that the ceasefire is incredibly fragile, and that there have been breaches with impunity—in particular, we think about the people of Jenin at this time. Does the Minister recognise that the lack of recognition of Palestine now is denying people across Palestine the protection that they need?

Anneliese Dodds: That protection is critical at every stage. The UK Government have been absolutely clear that we have seen far too much death and destruction in Gaza—we are now seeing truly heart-rending scenes of people trying to return to communities that have been destroyed, and we have seen over 46,000 people being killed. That population requires our support, and I do not believe that is contingent on political circumstances.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I would like to thank the Minister for her update yesterday, which was greatly appreciated. Does she agree with me that we are standing on the precipice of a new and dangerous world order, leaving behind one that based global peace on global justices that we have recognised? Close to 48,000 Palestinian men, women and children have been killed, while hundreds of thousands are returning to the rubble that was once their homes and, as we speak, mothers are looking for their children in the rubble.

[Shockat Adam]

At the same time, the most powerful man in the most powerful country in the world is behaving like a gangster. He is talking about displacing these people from their land, replacing their homes with beachfront properties, and creating casinos and a riviera. Is this not the time to categorically use the same words we use for other conflicts, and call this out for what it is: the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people? We must immediately recognise a Palestinian state, and can we stand up to President Trump and tell him that Gaza is not for sale?

Anneliese Dodds: As I stated in response to the question from the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake), the UK has been and will continue to be an advocate for the international rules-based order, which is incredibly important. We need to see those rules upheld by all, and of course we will continue to advocate for that at the UN in relation to all countries. We have been very clear about our position, which is that it must be possible for people to return, and I agree with the hon. Member about the horrendous situation so many Gazans are facing, which we have already talked about during this urgent question. I would just underline again what the Prime Minister said very clearly yesterday: when it comes to Gazans returning to their homes and communities, they must be allowed home.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): The comments made by the President of the United States about a riviera of the middle east undermine the hard work towards a two-state solution that, as the Minister has said, is the only way to have a lasting peace in the region. Can she confirm that it will be for the Palestinian people to determine the destiny of their country?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for asking me to confirm that it will be for the Palestinian people to determine the future of Gaza, and absolutely, we have been a crystal clear on that. Indeed, as I stated previously, we have been working with the Palestinian Authority on this.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers during this urgent question. Let me make it clear in the first instance that, not having seen the full detail of Trump's plans for Gaza, I believe I need to see more detail, and I think we should all look at that more astutely. However, I very much want a future for Gaza that sees a barren wasteland of death and destruction become something of value, with jobs, an economy and safety. Israel needs a secure border that safeguards Israeli citizens so that Hamas terrorists, murderers, rapists and child killers cannot murder Israeli people. We should remember that China and Iran have stood alongside Hamas. Will the Minister consent to keeping an open mind on a dialogue with a fresh approach to help those in Israel and the Gaza strip?

Anneliese Dodds: I am sure that Members across the House want to ensure that there is an economically viable situation in Gaza in the future. That is one of the many reasons why commercial operations have to be allowed to resume, and it is really important that the Government of Israel enable that. We of course need a situation of security and sovereignty for Gazans and all Palestinians, as I said before, as well as for Israelis.

The hon. Member talks about economic empowerment, and this issue has been crucial for the UK Government, as I saw for myself when I visited Palestinians in the west bank. I saw some of the support that the UK has been engaged in there, and we will continue that work.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) for securing this important urgent question. Over the last 16 months or so, we have seen Palestinian people displaced from their homes and communities—on many occasions not just once, but perhaps twice or three times—so for the President of the United States to suggest a further forced displacement seems to me to be not just illegal, but incredibly cruel. In diplomacy, we believe that timing is everything, so in order to give the Palestinian people some protection from outside actors who seem to wish to dictate what should happen to them, is it not now time for the international community and our Government to recognise Palestine as a state and give it all the international support and strength that that would provide?

Anneliese Dodds: My hon. Friend is right to refer to the levels of displacement. As I said previously, 90% of the population of Gaza has been displaced, some two or three times, and some up to nine times. When we consider the impact on whole families of having to move so many times, I am sure we are all disturbed by that. She is right to say that timing is important—of course it is—which is why the UK Government are considering this so carefully. We must use the mechanisms available to us to ensure, above all, that we get to a two-state solution and the peace that is the right of Palestinians and Israelis.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): The devastation in Gaza needs a strong international coalition focused on reconstruction, humanitarian aid and a pathway to a negotiated two-state solution with a viable Palestinian state, not speculation about handing over territory and forced displacement. On humanitarian aid, two pieces of legislation have now come into effect that will ban UNRWA operations in areas under Israeli occupation. What actions are the Government taking to prevent the largest humanitarian aid operation in Gaza from collapsing, with the devastating consequences that would have on Palestinians?

Anneliese Dodds: My hon. Friend is right; Gaza's recovery needs will be vast, and they are extremely serious. The UK is engaged with partners on assessing those needs, and working together so that we can ensure that the unprecedented scale of destruction in Gaza is remediated. That will require innovative financing mechanisms, for example. Above all, it must be a process that is driven by Palestinians. My hon. Friend talked about UNRWA, and I discussed that situation with the emergency relief co-ordinator a few days ago. We continue to work with partners on this, and the UK Government's position on UNRWA has been articulated a number of times from this Dispatch Box: we believe that it must be able to continue to operate.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): Let us be clear: Palestinian land belongs to the Palestinians, and any implication that they should be

forced from it should be unequivocally condemned. Individual Palestinians are routinely forced from their land by illegal settlement building in the west bank. Will the Minister join me in unequivocally condemning illegal settlement building in the west bank?

Anneliese Dodds: Yes, and having seen that activity for myself, with the impact it has had on Palestinians and their families, the violence that has often accompanied it, and the economic damage it has done, I am well convinced of that, as indeed the UK Government have been—they have stated that many times.

Business of the House

11.38 am

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): The business for the week commencing 10 February is as follows:

MONDAY 10 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill.

TUESDAY 11 FEBRUARY—Consideration of Lords message to the Water (Special Measures) Bill [*Lords*], followed by consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Arbitration Bill [*Lords*], followed by a debate on motions to approve the draft Neonatal Care Leave and Miscellaneous Amendments Regulations 2025 and the draft Statutory Neonatal Care Pay (General) Regulations 2025.

WEDNESDAY 12 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Data (Use and Access) Bill [*Lords*].

THURSDAY 13 FEBRUARY—General debate on LGBT+ history month.

The House will rise for the February recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 13 February and return on Monday 24 February.

The provisional business for the week commencing 24 February will include:

MONDAY 24 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the Crown Estate Bill [*Lords*].

Colleagues may also wish to be aware that the business on Wednesday 5 March is expected to be an estimates day (1st allotted day).

Jesse Norman: This week we have seen a Government who talk about growth but have proved themselves unwilling to support transformational investment at the AstraZeneca plant in Liverpool. At the same time, they appear keen to expand the sums being paid in relation to the Chagos islands to a number some 250 times larger than that being considered for AstraZeneca. I can see the degree of shame and embarrassment about that on the Government Benches, and their concern that important cities in this country are being deprived of local investment as a result.

In business questions on 28 November, I raised the issue of the assisted dying Bill and highlighted a host of procedural defects in the way it was being rushed through the House by the Government. The Bill was published barely two weeks before the vote on Second Reading, as the House will recall. No impact assessment or legal issues analysis had been published. The promoter of the Bill had circulated a document purporting to answer questions, but which actually left a host of important questions entirely untouched. Those questions included the Bill's impact on the medical profession and the relationship between medical staff and patients, and the impact on the provision and regulation of the different drugs and drug cocktails required. The questions included the involvement of the judiciary in the process and the balance of probabilities test for coercion that the Bill proposed.

It is not surprising that the Bill was and is being opposed by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and the Secretary of State for Justice, with the former saying:

[*Jesse Norman*]

"I do not think that palliative care, end-of-life care in this country is in a condition yet where we are giving people the freedom to choose, without being coerced by the lack of support available."

I am sorry to say that the Leader of the House responded to my remarks in a very patronising way, suggesting that it was somehow inappropriate and "political" for me to raise these matters at all. Of course, that was nonsense. I was not taking and do not take a position on the underlying issue. The whole purpose of business questions is to highlight and debate the passage of legislation through this House. But the Leader of the House's defensiveness was itself revealing. It showed the extent to which the Government are quietly and wrongly standing behind this private Member's Bill.

If we fast-forward two months, what do we find? A Supreme Court justice has told the Bill Committee that it is not clear what the judge's role is supposed to be in this legislation. They called the judicial protection "largely illusory" and echoed many other legal experts in highlighting the lack of capacity in the High Court. The Government's own chief medical officer specifically warned the Bill Committee that the NHS should not be rushed into becoming what would amount to a death service and said that most doctors would not wish to take part in the final stages of an assisted dying process, and emphasised the medical vagueness of the idea of qualifying people as terminally ill. We have heard about the serious potential for misdiagnosis through the horrendous case of Peter Sefton-Williams, who was incorrectly diagnosed with motor neurone disease and given as little as six months to live. Those were not my words; they are testimony on the Bill by leading experts from a range of fields.

All this has been made much worse by the rushed and secretive way in which the Bill Committee has been handled. The membership is disproportionately weighted towards supporters of the Bill. The schedule has been highly congested, with back-to-back sittings that do not allow MPs to prepare. Some of the sessions have been held in private. Attempts have been made to prevent key institutions, such as the Royal College of Psychiatrists, from appearing in front of the Committee at all. The effect of all these measures is to impede and inhibit external and internal scrutiny, and we now hear that the impact assessment will now not be published before Report stage. All these things are shocking attempts to undermine and short-circuit the proper scrutiny of the legislation.

The Leader of the House has said in terms that the Government are not supporting the legislation. She should therefore have an undiluted interest in ensuring that such an important and controversial Bill is properly handled. After all, she, more than any other, is supposed to be the custodian of proper parliamentary scrutiny of legislation. Will she therefore now act to address these obvious failures, or will she stick to her position that everything is fine and there is nothing to see here?

Lucy Powell: May I start with a couple of business questions updates? After my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrie-Smith) asked me to join her in congratulating "Bake Off" star Dylan Bachelet, they both joined me this week to taste some delicious cakes in my Leader of the House's office bake-off.

Dylan is not only an inspiration to young people from Aylesbury; I can report that he has extremely good taste, because he chose my lemon drizzle as the winner.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) for coming to see me this week with a copy of a Stone Roses record after we had exchanged nice words about Revolver Records in his constituency. I hope that hon. Members across the House can see that I am open to nice invitations celebrating constituencies and communities.

This week marks LGBT+ History Month, which is a chance for us to reflect and remember the contribution of the LGBT community and the discrimination that they still too often face. The Labour party is proud to be the party of equality, having abolished section 28 and introduced civil partnerships, the Gender Recognition Act 2004 and the Equality Act 2010 among other things.

Turning to the remarks of the shadow Leader of the House. First, let me take head on some of his misleading allegations about the process for the assisted dying Bill. As he is well aware, the House agreed by a clear majority that the Bill should proceed from Second Reading to Committee. That was the will of the House. That Committee is now convening, and in an unprecedented procedure for a private Member's Bill it has been taking written and oral evidence to begin with. It will begin many weeks of line-by-line scrutiny of the Bill, which is again unprecedented; it will be a lengthy Committee stage.

The make-up of the Committee, as set out in the Standing Orders, reflects the vote on Second Reading and the party make-up of the House. Many would argue that its make-up has been overly conscious of that. As I have said at the Dispatch Box on a number of occasions, while the Government have a neutral position on the principles of the Bill, we have a responsibility to ensure that any Bill passed by the House is workable and operable. That is the role that we will play through the Ministers representing the Government on that Committee.

It is extremely regrettable and ill-advised of the shadow Leader of the House to use his privileged position at the Dispatch Box to give such a political, one-sided and misleading account of what is a difficult, technical, important issue of conscience to the country and to the House. On the day of the Bill's Second Reading and since, I think every colleague across the House—perhaps apart from him—has recognised that we and our procedures showed themselves at their very best in debating that important matter.

The right hon. Gentleman could have used his moment at the Dispatch Box to mark another important anniversary. It may have escaped people's notice, but next Monday will mark 100 days since the Leader of the Opposition took office. I wondered how the right hon. Gentleman thought that was going. I am not sure why he did not celebrate all her brilliant achievements—perhaps it is because, like the rest of her leadership, they have gone completely unnoticed.

Oh no, sorry, we have learned a few things about the Leader of the Opposition: we now know what she is against. She is against maternity leave; the triple lock; abolishing hereditary peers; our Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which will protect young people from abusers; rights and security for workers; investment in the NHS; and—oh!—sandwiches for lunch. She has got a couple of things right: she admitted that her party made mistakes in government—indeed it did—and accepted

that it had no plan for growth. This morning, despite saying that there would be no new policy until 2027, she has finally come up with one.

I gently advise the shadow Leader of the House that until the Conservatives accept that they got it badly wrong on immigration and that all their rhetoric and targets in the last Parliament were just hot air, I do not think that anyone will take the Leader of the Opposition's ideas seriously. One hundred days is normally a moment for reflection and consideration, so he might want to reflect on that and agree that his party picked a bit of a dud.

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on babies (pregnancy to age 2), I have had the privilege over the past few months to meet leaders from across society who have incredible passion and energy for Government policy that relates to babies from pregnancy to age two. Will the Leader of the House consider a debate on the impact of all angles of Government policy on babies from pregnancy to age two, given the significant impact of that time on long-term health and wellbeing outcomes?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue and for all her campaigning on these matters, which she takes incredibly seriously. This Government consider the early years to be really important, as well as maternity and paternity leave and ensuring that parents can do their jobs and be parents. The early years are the most important in a child's life. I look forward to working with her on that.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I draw the attention of the House to the register of my interests. Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government made a statement to this House in which she said that she had agreed to delay the local elections in some areas for one year. I must confess that I am a bit confused, because my local council, Essex county council, is one of those areas. The briefing papers for the extraordinary full council meeting of Essex county council that took place on 10 January state:

"The Leader is minded to support the proposal to postpone the elections in order to maximise capacity for the transition process, whilst noting that this would lead to a two or three year postponement."

That is rather longer than the one year that the Secretary of State announced yesterday. Essex county councillors are usually elected for a four-year term and a postponement—really, a cancellation of elections for three years—would extend their terms of office by 75%. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on the principles of democracy in the United Kingdom?

Lucy Powell: First of all, I thank the hon. Lady for raising the issue of police community support officers in Essex last week. I am sure that she and many colleagues across Essex will be pleased with the news, subsequent to her raising the issue last week—I am sure that is not unrelated—that those PCSOs have been saved from the axe. In fact, last Friday the Government doubled the money available for neighbourhood policing.

The hon. Lady raised the elections that are now not going to happen in Essex. We set a very high bar for the postponement of any elections this year. This is a

one-year postponement. In the case of Essex, it is so that the greater Essex mayoral authority can be established. The intention is for elections for that mayoral authority to take place in May 2026. I know that these changes take time and can cause difficulties in local areas, but the devolution revolution that is coming her way through those changes will bring extra jobs, growth, better services, better transport and more power to her communities in Essex. I hope she will welcome that.

Gurinder Singh Josan (Smethwick) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's recent comments about supporting and enabling the expansion of nuclear power stations in the UK through small modular reactors. The science and technology is well proven but other aspects must be developed alongside, including the provision of appropriate grade nuclear fuel and a permanent solution for nuclear waste. In recent days, I have met representatives of Urenco, a specialist provider of uranium enrichment and fuel and nuclear waste services, which is developing plans for the UK's first geological disposal facility. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on all aspects of the nuclear jigsaw, to ensure a joined-up and sustainable energy future?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the nuclear industry and nuclear waste disposal. We need to put some rocket boosters under nuclear power in this country. It is vital to our future energy security. He is right that we have to do that alongside rigorous safety standards for waste disposal and other matters. I will ensure that he and the House are kept updated on these important matters.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In addition to the business that the Leader of the House has announced, in Westminster Hall on Tuesday 11 February there will be a debate on the cost of energy, and on Thursday 13 February there will be a debate on HIV Testing Week, followed by a debate on the prevention of cardiovascular disease. When we return after the recess, on Tuesday 25 February there will be a debate on maternity services, and on Thursday 27 February there will be a debate on rural crime, followed by a debate on women's health.

I am grateful to the Leader of the House for announcing the date of the estimates day debate. I am aware that at least six Select Committees are considering putting in a request. For new colleagues, estimates days are an opportunity to debate the work and spending of Government Departments. Applications do not have to come via a Select Committee; the Backbench Business Committee has put the application form on our website, and applications will close, because of the recess, on Friday 21 February. We will consider applications on Tuesday 25 February.

We have a queue of debates for the Chamber; in fact, as things stand, we could allocate debates for every Thursday through to beyond May. I note that the Leader of the House has not yet announced what time the Backbench Business Committee will be allowed after the recess, but in the event that we are offered Thursday 27 February, we have pre-allocated a debate on the three-year anniversary of the war in Ukraine, followed by a debate on St David's day. If we are offered Thursday 6 March, we will have a debate on International Women's Day, followed by a debate on political finance. I suggest that the Leader of the House would be well advised not to upset any of those sponsors.

[*Bob Blackman*]

The Leader of the House does excellent work in advising Government Departments on responding not only to the questions that we raise in the Chamber but to letters and questions raised elsewhere. However, this week the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West), met a group of Hindus from Bangladesh because of the atrocities in Bangladesh. I raised the matter in business questions, and Mr Speaker allowed an urgent question on the subject the following week. I think it would be courteous of the Minister to give a statement to the House on what subsequent action she is taking. Equally, I gently ask the Leader of the House to ensure that when we ask questions and she diligently writes to Departments, we actually get answers to our questions, because both the quality and the length of time that it takes to get a question answered seem very poor at the moment.

Lucy Powell: I thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for, as ever, advertising his forthcoming business, and for explaining how estimates days work. That is especially important for new colleagues, for whom the forthcoming debate will be the first such occasion. I hear his lobbying about the allocation of days, which I will take very seriously, as I always do, especially in relation to International Women's Day. I do not want to upset the sisterhood by any means.

The hon. Gentleman continues to raise many issues relating to the Hindu community, in this case in Bangladesh. He was successful in getting some responses. I will raise with the Foreign Office whether further information could be given in a statement, and ask that the House is kept updated. He is right that I take extremely seriously the timely and proper response that I expect from Ministers to parliamentary questions and correspondence. I will always chase those responses. I keep track of the letters that I send after business questions and matters that are raised with me, and I take them up robustly. I gently say to him and other colleagues that we have seen an over 50% increase in the number of parliamentary written questions since the election, as well as a huge increase in correspondence, so a bit of time is needed to deal with that. If anybody wants to raise a matter with me, I will chase those letters. I have quite a good track record of getting responses when they are not otherwise forthcoming.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am sure you are aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I hope the Leader of the House is, that we are currently undergoing a digital refresh of computer equipment and laptops here in the House of Commons. I was rather disturbed to learn that the equipment that is handed in is crushed and sent to landfill. Digital poverty is a multifaceted issue that impacts all aspects of life: for younger children, educational platforms cannot be accessed; job opportunities are harder to access, because 90% of jobs are only advertised online; and for older people, healthcare services and supporting information are all severely restricted without digital access. Therefore, may we have a debate on what we can do—not just as a Government, but this House, too—to increase access to the internet and the digital services that are essential to lifting people out of poverty?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises the really important issue of the digital divide. Digital inclusion is vital. More and more services are moving to digital platforms as we are in the digital age. If they are not accessible to everybody, then they are not able to serve everybody and we should absolutely address that. I am not aware of the particular issue he raises—the digital hardware of the House not being wiped and reused, and instead going to landfill—but I will look at it immediately after business questions and get back to him on what more can be done.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I am hugely concerned, my constituents are hugely concerned and the Cheshire police force is hugely concerned about the rising number of serious sexual attacks by those here illegally in this country and those who have been housed in immigration centres in Cheshire. May we have a debate on the rising risk in Cheshire, a review of legislation to remove foreign offenders, and the risk assessments undertaken on the threat posed by individuals placed in accommodation centres in Cheshire?

Lucy Powell: I thank the right hon. Lady for raising this issue. I am aware of some of the incidents that have happened in Cheshire and how alarming they must be for the local community and the local police force. They are absolutely totally abhorrent and unacceptable in all those cases. She is right to say that there is a range of issues that can be taken further. We have brought forward the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, which will make returning those who are here illegally and those who commit crimes when they are here much easier. We are making great strides on that. We are taking real action on violence against women and girls, ensuring criminal sanctions are appropriate, and we are putting more police on the streets. There are also particular issues with asylum hotels and the companies that run them, which I will take up for her.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Like much of the rest of the country we have a housing emergency in Rochdale, with 22,000 people on the waiting list and many, many children living in temporary accommodation that is unfit for family life and costs the taxpayer a fortune. Does the Leader of the House agree that, while the £500 million of new funding in the Budget for affordable and social housing was very welcome and long overdue, we need a debate in Government time on the need for the coming spending review to ensure more stable, secure homes like the council house that I grew up in?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I hear the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) talk about this issue regularly. She rightly makes the point that council housing used to be seen as the poor relation, but these days it is actually a luxury to get a council house. That is why, as part of our target to build 1.5 million new homes, a huge boost in social and new council housing is absolutely at the heart of meeting that target. As he says, having a secure, affordable home is the bedrock to a successful life.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): As the Leader of the House will be aware, the community infrastructure levy is a requirement to make a contribution towards essential

infrastructure. However, in West Berkshire, Waverley, Horsham and Bracknell Forest, there is evidence that exemptions that should have been given were not, resulting in residents being charged incorrectly and then chased by debt collectors for recovery of those fines. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time to discuss that important issue? Will she also congratulate Councillor Jeff Brooks, the leader of West Berkshire council, who has so far refunded £200,000 to residents who were incorrectly charged?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear of the hon. Gentleman's constituents who have been incorrectly charged and then chased down for those debts, but I am pleased to hear that some of that is now being put right. I know that there is a debate in Westminster Hall on the regulation of the bailiff sector, where he may want to raise some of those issues. However, I will happily raise what he has mentioned with Ministers and ensure that he gets a full reply.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): Like most MPs, one of my favourite things is to visit schools in my constituency. Recently, I was at Sir Graham Balfour school in Stafford where one of the students spoke to me passionately about how school sport and physical education benefit not only physical but mental health. Inspired by his campaigning, will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on improving access to PE and sport in schools?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning the issues raised with her on her recent school visit. PE not only plays a vital role in ensuring our young people have access to a broad curriculum that can help them better succeed in education, but is critical to mental and physical health and to our preventive work, and the Government are committed to that. I am sure that the subject would make a good debate were she to apply for one.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): The Deputy Prime Minister's announcement yesterday is widely believed to herald not just the widespread cancellation of democratic elections, but the introduction of far more powers for Government to centralise decision making and impose it on local authorities, as well as a massive reduction in the number of councillors representing local people in local authorities and the abolition of whole tiers of local authorities for which the Government have no electoral mandate—and that is on the basis of putative savings for which there is no proof, so the chaos of that reorganisation will have to be paid for by cuts in public services. When will the Government provide a full day's debate on the proposals for devolution and local government reorganisation across the country on a scale that we have not seen for some 50 years? Certainly, that merits a full day's debate and a vote at the end of it.

Lucy Powell: I am sorry the hon. Gentleman does not welcome our real commitment to devolution, ensuring that local communities have more power over the things that affect them, such as their local services, transport, economic development, and joining that up in a way that provides strategic benefit to those areas. I respect the hon. Gentleman, but I gently say that under the Government that he supported, local government was absolutely hollowed out after years and years of austerity, with local council after local council going bankrupt, month after month. We have given a record, long-term

settlement to local government and alongside that we are unashamedly pushing power out to communities. We have had several statements to the House already. There will be a Bill forthcoming that enacts many of the measures, and ample time for debate, but I will ensure that the House is kept fully up to date.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): Tomorrow is the one-year anniversary of the publication of the Hughes report, which found that the children left disabled by valproate and the women injured by pelvic mesh implants for life should be given urgent financial compensation. One year on, we are yet to see an official Government response to that report. The Leader of the House will know how important it is that women are listened to by healthcare professionals. Surely she agrees that when they are dismissed and left physically damaged by those who were supposed to have protected them, financial redress is deserved. Will she grant a debate in Government time to allow MPs from across this House—we all have constituents who have raised this with us—to discuss the recommendations of the all-important Hughes report to mark this significant occasion?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue and for her many years of important campaigning and leadership, which I know has been a great comfort to the many women—and not just women—who have been affected by this scandal. As she has said, the Hughes report was a significant watershed and a line in the sand. I will certainly inquire about the whereabouts of the Government response to that report, and will ensure that the House is updated at the earliest opportunity.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): As we make the important shift to new renewable energy, which we know is needed, there are a number of concerns on both sides of the House about the siting and appropriateness of battery energy storage systems. My own constituents have been left shocked by the planning inspector's decision to green-light an application, against the democratic will of the council, for a battery energy storage system on the green belt at Chapel Lane. May we have a debate in Government time to enable us all to air our views and concerns?

Lucy Powell: Let me first thank the right hon. Lady for raising with me recently some matters relating to correspondence and the lengthy wait for replies. Having raised the issue myself, I have now been assured that she should have received those replies in the last couple of days. I know that she has been raising the question of the battery storage application in her constituency for some time. As I am sure she will recognise, I cannot comment on a specific application, because the inspectorate has listened to the appeal and the findings are available on its portal. The Government make no apology, however, for wanting to get the infrastructure that we need into our communities as well as the housing, which is why we are reclassifying some suitable green belt as grey belt, although we do have very strict criteria. I will continue to ensure that there is ample time for the House to debate these matters which are so important to it.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): I regularly hear from parents in my constituency whose children are struggling to access the mental health support that

[Josh Dean]

they deserve, in some cases waiting months or even years for their first appointment with child and adolescent mental health services. However, I know that they will be encouraged by this Labour Government's commitment to cut waiting times, introduce mental health support in schools and open a network of Young Futures hubs. As we mark Children's Mental Health Week, may I ask if the Leader of the House will allow time for a statement on the Government's progress in improving mental health support for children and young people?

Lucy Powell: I certainly join my hon. Friend in marking Children's Mental Health Week, and he is right to raise these important matters. Mental health services, especially those for young people, have been the poor relation for far too long. I think that all of us, as constituency MPs, parents and others, recognise that the mental health crisis among our young people deserves the attention that it needs, which is why we are recruiting more mental health workers. I think that this would be a very good topic for a debate.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Next week is Mind Your Head week, which aims to raise awareness of mental health challenges facing the farming community. The theme this year is "positivity, resilience, and love".

Women in farming occupy many roles both on and off the farm, balancing childcare, caring responsibilities and non-farming work. They often have to manage gender inequalities in agriculture, and in some cases are victims of domestic violence and rural crime. Their voices and mental health struggles are rarely heard, but a new study conducted by the University of Exeter seeks to shed light on this important issue. Will the Leader of the House grant us a debate in Government time on the mental health of women in farming?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady has taken the opportunity—an important opportunity—to raise an issue which I am sure will be of interest to many Members on both sides of the House: the role that women play in farming and how vital that role is, and some of the challenges that they experience, often in silence or without recognition. I am sure that this too would be a very good topic for a debate.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I recently met constituents who are increasingly concerned about the anti-Hindu violence in Bangladesh. Since last August, there have been reports of more than 2,000 incidents of violence, most of which have been targeted at the minority Hindu community. Furthermore, I have seen deeply perturbing reports of the arrest and continuing custody of the former leader of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Chinmoy Krishna Das. The UK champions freedom of religion for all, and no one should be at risk of violence or targeted because of their beliefs. I note the response from the Minister for the Indo-Pacific, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West), on this issue in December. Will the Leader of the House either update the House, or ask the Foreign Secretary to make a statement on his assessment of the situation, and on the action that his Department has taken to engage with the new Government in Bangladesh, so that they can support the right of people of all religions to live freely?

Lucy Powell: This Government take these issues extremely seriously. My hon. Friend the Minister was in Bangladesh recently, where she made it very clear that the Bangladeshi Government should take more steps to protect religious minorities. The anti-Hindu violence in Bangladesh that my hon. Friend has described has already been raised twice during business questions, and is raised with me frequently. I will ensure that the Minister for Development updates the House at the earliest opportunity.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): May I echo the call from the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) for a Government response to the Hughes report on the use of sodium valproate? My constituent Charlie Bethune has been not only an incredible carer for his daughter Autumn but a doughty campaigner on this issue, which he is raising today in the Scottish Parliament. He believes that because the harm caused by sodium valproate was diagnosed across the United Kingdom, there should be a United Kingdom response to those who have suffered, and he fears that there may be a different response in Scotland. When the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care makes a statement, will he seek to co-ordinate with the devolved Administration, so that we have a unified response?

Lucy Powell: Let me take this opportunity to thank the right hon. Gentleman for all his tireless campaigning on these matters, on which he has worked with his constituent and others over many years. I will absolutely ensure that the House is updated on the Hughes report and issues relating to sodium valproate, and I will ensure that it covers the position UK-wide, and that there is co-ordination. I will get back to the right hon. Gentleman on that.

Rosie Wrihting (Kettering) (Lab): In the 1950s, Kettering had five cinemas, but since the Odeon closed its doors last week, we have none. Our swimming pool was built in 1984 and is in desperate need of investment, while our art gallery and museum have both been closed for some time. Constituencies like Kettering have been hit hard by the Conservatives' cultural vandalism, and my constituents are missing out as a result. Will the Leader of the House grant time for a debate on the huge importance of access to local culture and sport?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right: access to culture and sport is at the heart of thriving communities and happy places and people, and I am sorry to hear about what is happening in Kettering. As she will know, we have a manifesto commitment to replace the community right to bid with a strengthened right to buy assets of community value, and I think that would help in cases such as this. The subject of access to local culture and sport is raised with me regularly during business questions, and although the Backbench Business Committee's time is oversubscribed, I think this would make an extremely good subject for a Backbench Business debate.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I should first declare an interest, as chair of the Scotch whisky all-party parliamentary group. The Scotch whisky industry is obviously a heavy user of UK-produced glass, and is trying hard to increase its recycling. There is cross-party support for the extended producer responsibility

measures—I was a member of the Delegated Legislation Committee that considered them—but concern has been expressed to the APPG about the practicalities of extended producer responsibility, and the risk of its becoming a tax, rather than bringing about the circular economy that we all want. Speaking as a Scottish MP who saw the collapse of the deposit return scheme in Scotland and has heard the concerns expressed by businesses, may I ask for a debate in Government time on ensuring that we secure the right outcomes from extended producer responsibility?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for raising these important issues for the Scottish whisky industry and producers of glass in this country. We had a debate on the Floor of the House about that scheme recently, and I know that some of those issues were raised then, but I will ensure that Ministers have heard her concerns about extended producer liability and will get her a full response.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): In a week when we are reminded of the tragedy of Grenfell Tower, we have also learned about the scandal of companies issuing false fire safety certificates, or EWS1—external wall system—forms. I understand that there is no official register of those certificates, yet tens of thousands of homeowners are affected by the issue, and face their properties being uninsurable and unsaleable. Can we have a debate in Government time on this scandal and the need for an official register of these certificates?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. There are many tall buildings in my constituency of Manchester Central, so I am unfortunately all too familiar with the issues around EWS1 forms and the whole risk-assessment industry that has grown since Grenfell Tower. He can rest assured that the Government take these issues incredibly seriously. We issued a remediation acceleration plan just before Christmas, but I will ensure that there is ample time for the House to debate these matters.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Applications for battery storage facilities are flooding into the Scottish Borders. There are also plans for a massive 50-mile route of pylons across our unspoilt landscape. Local residents are concerned about the impact on their communities and on the natural environment. They feel that the Labour and SNP Governments will not protect them. I know that the Leader of the House looks for invitations, so will she visit the Scottish Borders to meet local residents, so that she can see for herself the impact that these developments will have on these communities and the environment?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. One of his previous invitations was to Center Parcs—I might take him up on that one. He does regularly invite me to his constituency. He raises a matter that is very serious to his constituents. We all have to recognise that there is a difficult balance to strike, and difficult issues to face, when it comes to getting the infrastructure that we need to be a clean energy superpower, and to have lower bills, job security and, crucially, energy security. There will be some difficult decisions around the grid, pylons and so on. We have to strike a balance, which is

why we are exploring how to ensure that communities that need the infrastructure in their locality can benefit from the lower bills that it will bring.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Back in 2021, residents in Kidsgrove were promised a portfolio of projects as part of the Kidsgrove town deal. To date, residents have experienced delay and confusion. They rightly want more openness and transparency from Newcastle-under-Lyme borough council. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the delivery of town deals, so that local people can see real delivery, and not more delays?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear about the challenges with the Kidsgrove town deal. What we have seen with the town deal model is a bidding war—a competitive, dog-eat-dog situation—that is not working or delivering for communities. That is why we are putting record levels of investment into communities through local government funding and moving towards long-term, stable core funding, so that local communities such as my hon. Friend's in Kidsgrove can have long-term certainty about funding.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): The Government's expressed political support for Heathrow airport expansion has sparked concerns that they might be getting ready to expand Luton airport too, despite the fact that the Government's own climate advisers say that no net expansion of airports should go ahead until there is a climate emissions framework in place. Have any Ministers indicated that they intend to publish a climate emissions framework, and if so, when? Will the Leader of the House use every lever in her power to ensure that, in due course, this House has a debate on that emissions framework before any new airport expansion is given the green light?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that issue. She will be aware that applications such as the one from Luton airport are to be considered in a quasi-judicial capacity by the Secretary of State for Transport, so it would not be appropriate for me to comment directly on that. However, I can assure her that any decisions on airport expansion would be taken in the context of our legally binding emissions targets and a whole range of criteria that she will be aware of, but I will ensure that any such decisions are brought to this House first for scrutiny by her and others.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): On Sunday, my constituent Jagtar Singh Johal will celebrate his 38th birthday. This will be his eighth birthday in solitary confinement while arbitrarily detained in an Indian prison. Can the Leader of the House raise his case with her Cabinet colleagues, and ensure that our Government continue to raise Jagtar's case at the highest levels with the Indian Government, to accelerate my constituent's return home to his family in West Dunbartonshire?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the difficult and tragic case of Jagtar Singh Johal, who is in prison in India. We have raised this issue with Prime Minister Modi on a number of occasions, and on every occasion we underline the need for an urgent resolution. I will ensure that my hon. Friend has a full update from Ministers, who will bring that to the Floor of the House if necessary.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I would like the Leader of the House to know that a number of my constituents have contacted me regarding the prescribing of antidepressant medicine in the UK and the iatrogenic harm caused to patients by antidepressant medication. Many are now diagnosed and suffering from conditions including post-acute withdrawal syndrome and post-SSRI—selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors—dysfunction. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) held a Westminster Hall debate on this issue only last year. However, given the severity of the concerns raised, will the Leader of the House consider a full debate in Government time on this very important matter?

Lucy Powell: I think every MP in the House will have had constituents contact them about the use of antidepressants, how they are prescribed, their effects, and whether they are fully understood by those they are given to. This is a really important issue, and I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets a full response, but I think this would make a very good topic for a debate.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): My right hon. Friend knows how much I value and enjoy our hospitality industry in South Shields. It is a major employer, contributing more than £80 million to our local economy, so we must keep it in business, but she will know that many in the industry are worried about upcoming tax changes. I know that this Government are committed to supporting businesses, so can we have an urgent debate on how we can mitigate the impact of these changes on the hospitality industry?

Lucy Powell: Like my hon. Friend, I fully support the hospitality industry. I recognise the unease and worry of many in the industry about how difficult business is at the moment; we have seen demand fall over recent years and costs go up as inflation went through the roof under the previous Government. We had to take difficult steps in the Budget to fix the foundations of the economy and ensure much-needed investment in our public services. We have tried to mitigate the impact of those steps as much as possible for small businesses, and 50% of the smallest businesses will not pay any additional national insurance contributions; in fact, many will see cuts. I hope to work with her and others to continue to reassure the hospitality sector.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Last week, I met the Harrogate branch of the National Autistic Society and heard first-hand stories of issues faced by people with autism, including getting a diagnosis, getting help and support into employment, and stigma. Will the Leader of the House provide Government time for a debate on the challenges that autistic people face and how we can do more to support them?

Lucy Powell: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's meeting with the Harrogate branch of the National Autistic Society. Autism and other special educational needs and disabilities are regularly raised in these sessions. We have already had some debates. The Government and local authorities are putting more support into special educational needs, which could help to support people in his community. I will ensure there is ample time to debate these issues.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Can we have a statement on knife crime, and particularly the proposal for knives to be sold with rounded or blunted tips to reduce the risk of death or serious injury if they are used as a weapon?

Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Idris Elba, whose powerful documentary "Our Knife Crime Crisis" raised the issue last week, as well as the group of judges, surgeons, psychiatrists and university researchers who have, over the last decade, made the case for phasing out pointed kitchen knives, which are far and away the most common murder weapon in England and Wales?

Lucy Powell: The issues of the knife crime epidemic—that is the only way to describe it—are profound, and I thank my hon. Friend for raising them. I join him in supporting the work of Idris Elba, who recently met the Prime Minister in Downing Street as part of the coalition to tackle knife crime.

We are doing a range of things, and my hon. Friend will be aware that we have already banned zombie-style knives. We are banning ninja swords, and we are bringing forward further measures in the forthcoming crime and policing Bill. We also have to do more on prevention through education, the Young Futures programme and youth hubs around the country, so that our young people stop carrying knives.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I put on record my sheer admiration for my constituent and local community champion, Julie Meares. I first met her four years ago, when she wanted to make sure we had a proper community centre in the centre of Braithwaite. We got there with her dedication to improving Braithwaite, and I went to the opening of the new Keith Thompson community centre.

Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Julie Meares? Can we have a debate in Government time on the importance of community hubs and community centres, which play a vital role in improving society and providing a space for us all to get together in our local communities?

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Julie Meares and all those who have supported the community centre in Braithwaite. I think we would all like to spend a bit more time in this place celebrating volunteers like Julie. They are the backbone of our communities, without whom we would not have the places that we all enjoy living and working in.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): Illegal e-scooters and illegal e-bikes are a menace to many of our communities, including mine in Southend West and Leigh. Just this week, Essex police has moved from education to enforcement, and nearby Basildon council has decided to end its e-scooter trial. E-scooters are a good, environmentally friendly way to get around, if implemented properly. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time to discuss this important issue?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right that e-scooters can be a plague on our communities. We will legislate to ensure that e-scooters are used responsibly and safely.

We will also make it easier to seize vehicles, including e-scooters, that are ridden dangerously on the pavement or left abandoned. These measures will come forward soon, and there will be ample time to debate them.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Businesses in Bath are increasingly worried about shoplifting, but online fraud is also a huge worry, and it is surging. Nearly 70,000 cases were reported in 2023-24, with victims losing an average of £800. Can we have a debate in Government time to understand the extent of the problem, what the Government propose to do about this surge, and how we can protect our constituents?

Lucy Powell: Retail crime was effectively decriminalised by the previous Government, and we are taking steps to reverse that through our crime and policing Bill, which will also have measures on online fraud. The Bill will be introduced imminently, and there will be ample time to debate these matters.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): What action can be taken when a previous Member of Parliament continues to promote themselves in the constituency where they lost their seat, retaining the portcullis insignia and the title in their publicity?

Lucy Powell: I was appalled to see the pictures and the evidence that my hon. Friend sent to me of her predecessor effectively parading around her constituency as an MP or a shadow MP, or other such things that do not exist. Using the portcullis symbol in that way is absolutely against protocol. I take this matter very seriously, and I know my hon. Friend has raised it with the House authorities and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. I will ensure that action is taken and get back to her.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): For the last 25 years, Falun Gong practitioners in China have suffered relentless persecution at the hands of the Chinese Communist party. Reports from human rights organisations highlight that millions have been subjected to imprisonment, forced labour and torture simply for practising their faith.

The expansion of this campaign beyond China's borders is deeply troubling. Leaked reports from China's Ministry of Public Security indicate that the regime is now escalating efforts to eliminate Falun Gong worldwide using a network of spies, social media, disinformation and harassment of practitioners—even here in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This is not just an attack on religious freedom; it is an affront to British values, democracy and the rule of law. Will the Government urgently investigate and counter the influence of the Chinese Communist party's transnational repression within our borders, including its attacks on Falun Gong and its attempts to censor Shen Yun performances?

Lucy Powell: As ever, the hon. Gentleman raises an important issue of freedom of religion or belief. I reassure him that the Chancellor and the Foreign Secretary raised human rights and matters of freedom of religion or belief on their recent visits to China, and that these issues are taken very seriously by this Government. I thank him for continually raising these issues in this House.

Lee Barron (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): The police station in Corby was closed down in 2017. It was replaced by a policing hub on the second floor of a public building, and that hub is now open for only two days a week. People on bail are asked to take selfies to demonstrate that they are meeting their bail conditions. Frankly, that is not good enough for the people of Corby. Public perception of local policing has been shattered, and there is now a view that local police are somewhat remote. Will the Leader of the House support my campaign to bring a police station and a dedicated response unit back to Corby, to return to true local policing?

Lucy Powell: We have to be honest that a phenomenal number of police stations were closed under the previous Conservative Government, and that community policing was left on its knees. We are determined to fix that, which is why we are bringing in more neighbourhood police officers and more police community support officers so that people can feel reassured by having police out on the beat.

My hon. Friend may want to raise some of these issues when we debate the forthcoming crime and policing Bill.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. It would be helpful if the remaining Members could keep their questions very short, so that I can get you all in.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): Croydon's youth engagement team is a council-run service that provides critical support for young people across Croydon, including keeping kids away from being groomed by gangs, supporting a youth assembly that gives kids a civic voice, and providing a youth hub in New Addington, in my constituency. Those services are now under threat because Croydon council deems them to be non-statutory and needs to make savings. Will the Leader of the House allow time for a debate about long-term funding settlements for youth services and how we can ensure they are given the statutory protections that they need?

Lucy Powell: After years of cuts and austerity, we have seen the decimation of youth services and youth hubs in many of our communities, so it is not surprising that knife crime and other issues have increased as a consequence. My hon. Friend knows that this Government are committed to prevention education and to bringing youth hubs to every community.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I would like to draw the Leader of the House's attention to the experience of a constituent of mine who was a victim of domestic violence. The perpetrator, who went to prison for his violent crimes, is named on a joint tenancy agreement with a local housing association along with my constituent, yet my constituent has been told that there is no way to remove him from the tenancy without his permission, which he refuses to provide. Will the Leader of the House set aside Government time for a debate to discuss that extremely concerning matter, so that victims of domestic violence, such as my constituent, will not be put through further trauma?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about that case. I assure my hon. Friend, his constituent and other survivors of domestic abuse that we will be strengthening the rights and protections available for women in co-habiting

[Lucy Powell]

couples, including addressing issues around joint tenancies, so that they can remain in their homes. I look forward to letting my hon. Friend know when those measures will be introduced.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): Cultural and community institutions in the heart of central London face an uncertain future. The Jubilee Hall gym, Central YMCA and the Prince Charles cinema all have uncertain futures because of the complex property ownership structures in which they exist. Central YMCA faces closures tomorrow, so will the Leader of the House support me with my call to meet the landlord, so we can come together to discuss a sustainable, long-term future for that institution?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right that we need to put more power back into the hands of local communities and local government to ensure the long-term future of community assets, like the ones she describes.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Sam Elliott, a 16-year-old from Buxton, in my High Peak constituency, who ran a marathon across the month of January to raise important money for Prostate Cancer UK? Prostate cancer is the most common cancer in men, so will the Leader of the House join me in encouraging all men to check their risk on the Prostate Cancer UK website? It takes 30 seconds, but it could save their lives. Will she support me in considering a debate on tackling that most important risk to men's health?

Lucy Powell: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Sam Elliott, who ran a marathon across January to highlight the issue of prostate cancer. My hon. Friend is right that early diagnosis and screening could save many lives. It is vital that we get more early diagnoses of that important cancer, as this Government intend to do.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): Inglis Bridge in Monmouth has been closed since September, causing a one-mile detour for children going to school at the Osbaston Church in Wales school. As the Leader of the House will know, it is difficult enough getting ready for school, and getting kids, prams and bikes out of the door, without having to go a mile along narrow pavements around Monmouth. It is also difficult for wheelchairs users to access the green space at Vauxhall Fields from Osbaston while the bridge is closed. Will the Leader of the House support my request to the Ministry of Defence, which owns the bridge, to provide funding to refurbish and reopen it as soon as possible?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend rightly highlights the importance of that bridge to her community, and its closure is causing huge disruption for many of her constituents. I know she has been touch with Defence Ministers about the matter, and I will follow that up for her, so we can get that bridge in Monmouth open as soon as possible.

Chris Ward (Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven) (Lab): Last week I visited a local sixth-form college in Brighton, and one of the first questions I was asked was

when the House will vote on introducing votes at 16. I did my best, telling the students that we had a manifesto commitment and that I hoped the vote would be later this year. Will the Leader of the House do one better and confirm when we will have a vote in this House?

Lucy Powell: I know that this issue is close to my hon. Friend's heart and that it is something he strongly supports, as I do. Votes at 16 was an important measure in our manifesto, but he will know that it has not been identified in a Bill to be introduced in this Session. I hope that an elections Bill, including votes at 16, will be forthcoming in the next Session and that we will all get a chance to vote for that measure, as I know he and I both will.

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): My constituent Alison Parr has had the most appalling time trying to obtain free prescriptions on the NHS, to which her profoundly disabled daughter, Ruby, is perfectly entitled. Please may we have a debate in Government time on how the NHS and all public services can be made fully responsive to the needs to disabled people?

Lucy Powell: I congratulate my hon. Friend on holding more Change NHS consultations in her constituency than any other Member has held in theirs. As a result of those meetings, she has raised the important issue of free prescriptions. I will raise her concerns with the relevant Minister and ensure that she gets a full response.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Dates-n-Mates is a fantastic charity that operates across Scotland, including in Falkirk. It provides hundreds of events every year that offer friendship and opportunities for adults with learning disabilities. The real asset of the charity is its workforce, including John Clarke, who started as a service user and is now the Falkirk director, and some 40% of the workforce of Dates-n-Mates are adults with learning disabilities. When I met John, he spoke to me about the challenges that adults with learning disabilities find in the workplace. From interviews to starting a new job, even those with years of expertise, like John, often struggle to be taken seriously and are deprived of suitable opportunities. Will the Leader of the House support me in securing a debate in Government time on what the Government can do to level the playing field for adults with learning disabilities in the workplace?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking John Clarke for all the work he has done over the years to raise awareness of these issues through Dates-n-Mates, which is a great name for an organisation. My hon. Friend will know that we are actively encouraging employers to create disability-inclusive workplaces. I will ensure that he and the rest of the House are kept up to date with those matters.

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): Although Leigh and Atherton are a part of Greater Manchester, they are also close neighbours of Warrington and St Helens. The road network designed around our factories and mills now struggles with the increasing amount of traffic and congestion. Will the Leader of the House commit to holding a debate about improving public transport

and connectivity in those areas, which will be popular with Members including our Cheshire and Merseyside neighbours?

Lucy Powell: I am a close neighbour of my hon. Friend, and my husband works in Warrington and uses those roads regularly. I share her frustration that the road networks in the north-west, around our region and across many parts of the north of England are in a poor state, and insufficient to cope with the increased traffic that she mentions. I will ensure that the relevant Minister has heard her pleas, but this subject would make a good topic for a debate.

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): My constituents in East Worthing and Shoreham, and all those served by Southern Water, face a 47% increase in their bills after years of mismanagement by the company and the previous Government. Will the Leader of the House assure me that the Government will ensure that the additional money that my constituents will be paying will be put into fixing our broken water system, not into the pockets of executives and shareholders?

Lucy Powell: Water customers in my hon. Friend's constituency, and in many others, have been left to pay the price of many years of Conservative failure. The Conservatives allowed water companies to spend billions of pounds on bonuses and shareholder payouts, instead of investing in our crumbling infrastructure. I assure him that the money raised from increased water bills will go to water infrastructure.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): Yesterday's meeting of the Scottish Affairs Committee took some interesting and informative evidence from representatives of the space industry in the UK. The launch of the first commercial space rocket from SaxaVord spaceport in Shetland is likely to take place before the end of the

year. The industry has potentially great commercial benefits for the UK and is very important to our integrity as a sovereign nation. One of the key asks of the representative we spoke to was that there should be a Minister for space, who could help them to navigate the various jurisdictions they have to speak to, cut through the number of local authorities and other authorities they have to deal with, and simply be a champion for their industry. Will my right hon. Friend raise those matters in Government?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; space has transformed in strategic importance over the past decade. The Minister for Science, Research and Innovation has responsibility for co-ordinating space policy right across Government, and I know that he will be putting rocket boosters under this policy area in the future.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): Stockton is rightly famed for its high street, the widest in Britain, with amazing independent stores such as Chic & Crafty, Regency Records, and the Book Dragon supported by our business improvement district. Will my right hon. Friend join me in commending Stockton borough council for its investment in a new park and health diagnostic centre in Stockton, road improvements in Norton and £20 million for Billingham town centre, all of which will benefit from this Government's commitment to cracking down on retail crime and investing in Cleveland police? Will she also find Government time for a debate on high street renewal?

Lucy Powell: Not one to miss an opportunity for another pun, I shall say that I know that Stockton high street has a reputation far and wide for what it offers. My hon. Friend is right to raise these issues. I am glad to hear that Stockton is getting the investment in its town centre that it so desperately needs.

UK-EU Relations

12.51 pm

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the UK's relationship with the EU. On Monday, in Brussels, the Prime Minister attended an informal retreat with the 27 EU leaders and Presidents von der Leyen and Costa. This marked a clear step forward for this Government's reset of the UK's relationship with the EU. He is the first British Prime Minister to join a meeting of European Council members since the UK left the EU. The Prime Minister discussed the common threats that the UK and the EU face, and the value that closer UK-EU co-operation on security and defence could bring. These were points that he also discussed earlier in the day, when he met the Secretary-General of NATO.

With the EU's 27 leaders, the Prime Minister outlined a number of steps to increase co-operation on shared threats, including cross-border crime and illegal migration, while delivering growth and security at home. He called on Europe to step up and project strength, to keep up the pressure on Putin, alongside sustained military support to Ukraine, to put it in the strongest possible position this year. He set out a strong case for European security and defence: an ambitious UK-EU security partnership; a deeper role for Europe within NATO; the continued importance of small groups such as the joint expeditionary force; together with a continent-wide increase in defence investment. The Prime Minister was clear that the UK would play its full part in European defence and was ready to work together with the EU.

On Tuesday, we announced that the UK will welcome the Presidents of the European Council and the European Commission to the UK for the first UK-EU leaders' summit, which will take place on Monday 19 May. This first summit will provide an opportunity to further strengthen the relationship between the UK and the EU, for the benefit of all our people.

On Tuesday, I attended the UK-EU forum in Brussels to discuss the shared challenges and opportunities facing the UK and the EU, opposite my EU counterpart, Maroš Šefčovič. I made the case that this Government will be guided by what I am calling "ruthless pragmatism"—working in the UK's national interest to make people across the UK safer, more secure and more prosperous. The Government's position is that it is in the British national interest to improve our economic, safety and security relationships with our nearest neighbours. We reject the ideological approach of the past and will take a hard-headed assessment of the British national interest.

As the Leader of the Opposition recently said:

"We announced that we would leave the European Union before we had a plan for growth outside the EU."

She said:

"Those mistakes were made because we told people what they wanted to hear first and then tried to work it out later."

This Government will end that chaotic, dogmatic decision making. We should be guided by the principle of mutual benefit, finding collaborative solutions to our common problems. We should be open-minded to proposals that deliver better outcomes for the British people, within the manifesto on which this Government were elected.

This Government have been clear that we are not hitting rewind. We are not undoing Brexit and we are not rejoining the single market or the customs union, but we are looking to make Brexit work in a ruthlessly pragmatic way. That is the spirit that we are taking into the discussions with the EU—not a zero-sum game, but a win-win for both sides, with people across the UK and the EU benefiting. Yesterday I met my EU counterpart, Maroš Šefčovič, and discussed how we can best work together to enhance co-operation in areas of mutual benefit. We are committed to staying in regular contact as we progress this work.

This Government were elected on a mandate to increase national security through strong borders, to increase people's safety and to increase prosperity through growth. Our European friends have mutual interest in those priorities. It is those priorities that form the three pillars of the reset in our relationship: security, safety and prosperity. And I am pleased to say that on all three of those issues we are making progress. And work is happening right across Government, from the Prime Minister to the Chancellor at the Eurogroup and the Foreign Secretary at the Foreign Affairs Council.

There have been nearly 70 direct engagements between UK Ministers and their EU counterparts since we came into government, and we look forward to many more, including at the upcoming UK-EU summit. Some people make the false argument that we need to choose either America or Europe, but for this Government the UK's national interest is paramount and demands that we work with both.

The Prime Minister made the point on Monday evening that the world today is very different from that in 2016, and even in 2024. In this time of change, this Government are stepping up to build alliances in a bid to make people safer and more prosperous. That is the core of our national interest, and I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

12.57 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I thank the Paymaster General for advance sight of his statement, and I am grateful to him for coming to the House today to give us a rendition of the speech that he gave in Brussels on Tuesday—I am sure that it sounded even better accompanied by a cool glass of Belgian Chardonnay and the promise of a long continental lunch.

I note that the Paymaster General described the Prime Minister's meeting with 27 EU leaders this week as being an "informal retreat". An informal retreat indeed—that is, one suspects, how these words will come to characterise this Government's negotiations with the EU. The last Conservative Government took us out of the EU and, despite the attempts of the Labour party to frustrate the will of the people, into an era of our being a sovereign nation, which has brought major benefits.

Under the Conservative Government, we secured more than 70 trade deals with other countries around the world and, since leaving the EU, UK trade has increased from about £1.04 trillion in 2015 to £1.74 trillion last year. We ended the supremacy of EU law, we delivered on our promise to leave the common fisheries policy,

and we delivered the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe. We turned a page, and it is vital that the Labour Government do not turn it back.

The Paymaster General talks of ruthless pragmatism in our negotiations with the EU. I wonder whether this will be the same ruthless pragmatism that is bringing us the Chagos deal. Will it be the same ruthless pragmatism that has caused the Government to spend £9.4 billion a year on above-inflation pay rises for unionised sectors without any promise of reform? Perhaps it is the same ruthless pragmatism that saw the collapse of the £450 million AstraZeneca deal last week. When Labour negotiates, our country loses.

I have a great deal of respect for the Paymaster General—I hope he will do better than his friends and colleagues. He has talked to us about security, safety and prosperity—all very nice, but enough of the platitudes, let us talk about the plan. What do the Government actually want from the negotiations? What are the tangible gains they hope to make, and what are their red lines? We have heard about the customs union and a single market, but he knows that that is not enough. He says the Government “are not hitting rewind”, but we know the Government are open to dynamic alignment and a role for the European Court of Justice because he has twice declined to rule that out in this House. Going back to the ECJ for GB would be completely unacceptable.

On defence, the right hon. Gentleman mentioned the NATO Secretary-General’s plea to step up and project strength. Is that what the Government will do? I know the Secretary-General has been asking European countries for a marked increase in defence spending. What is the Government’s response to that? Will he confirm that NATO remains the cornerstone of our defence arrangements?

There was no mention of fish. A word of advice to the right hon. Gentleman: fish are very important, and they will be very important in these negotiations. What is the Government’s position? Will he commit to there being no reduction in our current fishing rights? It is reported that our friends and allies in the French Republic have said that nothing can be negotiated until fish are negotiated. Will he confirm that he has told them firmly and politely, “Non”?

There is no mention of free movement. I noticed the other day that the Home Secretary ruled out a youth mobility scheme. Is that Government policy or was that just the Home Office freelancing? I ask because last week in Westminster Hall the right hon. Gentleman seemed to be pretty open to the idea. What is the Government’s position?

On the Pan-Euro-Mediterranean convention—PEM—a Minister told the “Today” programme on 23 January that the Government were “not seeking” to join PEM. Later that day, the right hon. Gentleman said that the Government

“do not currently have any plans to join PEM”.—[*Official Report*, 23 January 2025; Vol. 760, c. 1091.]

On 26 January, the Chancellor of the Exchequer said that the Government were considering joining PEM, but then on 3 February, the right hon. Gentleman said in answer to a written question from the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) that the Government “do not currently have any plans”.

I would be grateful if he could tell us what the Government’s position is, and if he cannot, perhaps he would be good enough just to make up another one.

The Opposition believe there should be no backsliding on free movement or compulsory asylum transfers. We believe that no new money should be paid to the EU. We believe that no reduction in our current fishing rights should be given away. We believe in no rule-taking, dynamic alignment or European Court jurisdiction. We believe in no compromise on the primacy of NATO as the cornerstone of European security. That is what the Opposition believe; it is time for the Government to tell us what they believe. A future Government will not be bound by a bad Labour deal.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I thank the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for his contribution. Of course NATO remains the cornerstone of our security; that has been a cross-party position for decades. He asks about plans and red lines. I refer him to our manifesto, which was put to the people last year, that contains those clear red lines of no return to freedom of movement, the single market or the customs union. He can see in that examples of what the Government are seeking to negotiate.

The hon. Gentleman talks about negotiating international agreements. There are many people from whom I would take advice about international agreements, but I hope the House will forgive me if the Conservatives—the party that managed to send hundreds of millions of pounds to Rwanda and all they got in return was sending some volunteers and most of their Home Secretaries there—are not at the front of the queue for giving advice on how to negotiate international agreements.

I give some credit to the Leader of the Opposition, who strikes a markedly different tone on this issue from that struck by the hon. Gentleman today. She admits freely that the last Government left without a plan for growth, and that, frankly, they ended up making it up as they went along. I was surprised that the hon. Gentleman did not begin his remarks by repeating that apology. Perhaps he has a different view than the one taken by his leader.

The hon. Gentleman talks about the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, but he was part of a Government who negotiated a role for the European Court of Justice in the Windsor framework. He talks about standards. This Government are committed to the highest standards, whether that is on product safety, employment rights or consumer rights. We believe in a race to the top on standards, not the race to the bottom that would be the dream of the Conservatives.

As the Government move forward, our test is the national interest. It is about making Britain safer, more secure and more prosperous. There is another test for the Leader of the Opposition, however. I see that she has put out a social media video about tests, which is worth a couple of minutes for mild entertainment if nothing else. The test for her is whether she will face down the ideologues in her party. Is she going to show some political courage and back the national interest, or is she just going to back down in the face of the ideologues in her party? On the basis of the hon. Gentleman’s contribution, I am not optimistic.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I very much welcome the statement from my right hon. Friend, but the reality is that he has

[Liam Byrne]

inherited a deal with the European Union that has knocked about 4% to 5% off our economic output each year. Certainly, the Business and Trade Committee heard in Brussels last week a clear message from the business community that we need to be as specific and as ambitious as we can be ahead of the reset summit with the President of the European Commission. What plans does the Paymaster General have to bring together the British business community and, indeed, the trade union community so that the Prime Minister can go into his summit with President von der Leyen clear-minded about just how ambitious our wealth creators want him to be?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The Chair of the Select Committee is entirely right about the involvement of civil society, trade unions and businesses. I am sure that he will have seen the comments of the managing director of food at Marks & Spencer only today, who said:

“We wholeheartedly support the Government’s plan to negotiate a Veterinary Agreement; the benefits would be significant, there is no discernible downside, and we will offer whatever help we can to aid the negotiations.”

There was a time when the Conservative party was on the side of business—clearly no more.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. I welcome much of the statement’s content—that the Government are serious in their commitment to resetting our broken relationship with the European Union—but what the Liberal Democrats want is action. The European Union is our closest neighbour and largest trading partner. I sense that the Minister knows that we have to get on with repairing the trading relationship which was so badly damaged under the former Conservative Government, so please let us get on and do it. The botched Brexit deal has been a complete disaster for our country, especially for small businesses, which have been held back by reams of red tape and new barriers to trade, costing our economy billions in lost exports. The Minister talks of pragmatic negotiation. Surely what is pragmatic is to drop the Government’s red lines and agree a new UK-EU customs union. It would be the single biggest step that the Government could take to unlock growth, and I cannot think of anything more pragmatic. Liberal Democrats will continue to call on the Government to do the right thing.

We are also disappointed by the Home Secretary’s comments at the weekend on ruling out a youth mobility scheme. Does that represent the Government’s stance? A youth mobility deal would be good for our economy, especially our tourism and hospitality sectors, while providing young British people with the opportunity to work and study abroad. It would be a win-win. Not only that, it is what the British public want. New polling shows that two thirds of the UK population are in favour of such a scheme. Does the Minister not agree that introducing a youth mobility scheme is exactly the kind of pragmatic negotiation that the Government should be prioritising?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful as always for the contribution of the hon. Lady; we had a fine debate in Westminster Hall last week. All I would say to her

about speed, though, is that this Government are acting on the red lines in our manifesto around the single market, customs union and freedom of movement, on which we were elected and which delivered this majority last July. I looked at the Liberal Democrats manifesto and its plans for the relationship with the European Union, and it contained four steps. If we were choosing to do this in four different phases, we would be moving a lot more slowly than we are at the moment, so I hope the hon. Lady will welcome the progress we are making.

I know there is a lot of speculation on the issue of youth mobility. Of course, we consider sensible proposals in accordance with our red lines, but our position remains the same: there are no plans for a youth mobility scheme, and we have been clear that there will be no return to freedom of movement.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I guess I should not be surprised to hear the Conservatives trying to defend an impossibly bad deal for British business, which is why I am so relieved that the grown-ups are going to Europe and working out what is in the national interest. May I press the Minister on something that it is very clearly in the national interest to resolve with our European partners? National Grid estimates that it will cost the UK Exchequer £5 billion to £8 billion over this Parliament to have a differential emissions trading scheme between us and Europe. Pollution does not respect borders, and we all want to tackle the climate crisis. Can he confirm that resolving the issues around the carbon border adjustment mechanism will be on the agenda for the summit in May?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who I know has campaigned on this issue. Energy is very much a priority for the discussions—specifically the emissions trading scheme and linkage. The existing trade and co-operation agreement commits the UK and the EU to considering that.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): The Minister rightly speaks about the importance of NATO, which is key to our defence strategy. However, I have real concerns about the negotiations taking place on the defence strategy and on working with the European Union. We on the NATO Parliamentary Assembly have often spoken about the role of PESCO—the permanent structured co-operation—and the procurement strategy. Different countries procuring different elements can run into some constitutional problems, which can be a problem over generations of procurement, and it is important that protocols are made now for how those two things interact. I ask the Minister not to sign up to European programmes without ensuring that we build in protocols, so that PESCO cannot undermine article 5 decisions. As it stands, the ideology of PESCO stands in the way of article 5 decisions. If the Minister would like to speak about this further, I would be happy to meet him.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I would be more than happy to speak to the right hon. Gentleman—I acknowledge his expertise in these matters. He refers to interoperability, which is hugely important. He will have seen that the Prime Minister met the Secretary-General of NATO on Monday. That sends out a signal that NATO remains absolutely fundamental; it is the foundation stone of

post-war security and of our approach going forward. What we seek to do will be complementary to NATO, to build on our collective strength in these dangerous times.

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): British businesses are clear that they want the Government to cut paperwork, tackle the trade barriers that they face, and lower the cost of selling goods and services to our trading partners in the EU. The Leader of the Opposition said last week that the Conservative Government left the EU without a plan. Does the Minister agree that that is typical of the chaotic economic management of the Conservatives, and that once again it is up to the Labour Government to clean up their mess?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. At least the Leader of the Opposition was candid about the chaotic decision making under the previous Government. Together with our friends and neighbours in the EU, we have over £800 billion-worth of trade. It is clearly in our national interest to lower trade barriers pragmatically in that space.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I am pleased that this Government are moving away from the ideological fantasies of the Conservative Government and taking a pragmatic approach to EU-UK relations. Passive divergence—doing nothing when regulations move forward in the EU—is increasingly a concern for British businesses. It leads to huge trade barriers in emissions trading, for example, which is badly hurting the UK economy. What does the Paymaster General propose to do about passive divergence?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: We are not doing nothing. There are areas where this Government will be in a world-leading space. Let us look, for example, at what we are doing on employment rights and product safety. As I indicated earlier to the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), the Government believe in a race to the top on standards, not a race to the bottom.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I welcome the increased number of British officers now working with Europol. Will the Minister tell me more about how we will work with our European partners to tackle transactional crimes such as people smuggling and drug trafficking?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I am pleased that we have already increased our National Crime Agency presence at Europol. The speed with which we can share data is hugely important. When crimes are committed, those early hours and days are so important for catching those responsible. We want to work with the EU and international partners so that criminals have no place to hide on our continent.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Those in the fishing industry will have noted not only that the Minister did not mention fish in his statement, but that he did not respond to the question from the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), about fishing. Will he give an assurance to those in the industry that there will be

no sell-out—whether on fishing grounds, quotas, days at sea and so on—and that he will do absolutely nothing to worsen the industry?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Gentleman is right to mention fishing. I can tell him first and foremost that I will engage with the fishing industry and its representatives about the issues that they face, particularly in selling into European markets. We will of course advocate for the interests of our fishers, and ensure that we fulfil our legal obligations on the marine environment.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): As a result of the previous Government's bad deal, companies in my constituency tell me about the impact that the barriers to trade with the EU are having on their businesses, hitting profits and affecting jobs. Does the Minister agree that it would be foolhardy for this Government not to tackle those barriers and back British businesses?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We speak to businesses, and they want fewer barriers to trade. It is astonishing that the modern Conservative party does not seem to share that view.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I welcome the Minister's statement on closer co-operation with the EU on defence and security, but on the day the Bank of England cut its growth forecast from 1.5% to 0.75%, does the Minister agree that the single biggest thing we could do to turbocharge our economy in the medium and longer-terms is to form a customs union with the EU?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: We were elected on a manifesto that set out clear red lines, but of course there is significant economic advantage, not just to the United Kingdom but to citizens all across Europe, in the reset that we are now looking to take forward. Whether in making our citizens more prosperous, or in making them safer and more secure, that work will deliver for Britain.

Chris Ward (Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Minister's statement. Isn't it nice to finally have a Government who want to work with, rather than alienate, our European partners? In that spirit, does he agree that there is a chasm between the thin, last-minute deal that the previous Government negotiated—which the Leader of the Opposition now derides as a deal “without a plan”—and the red lines that he and his Government have set out? That is the landing zone that I hope the Government will get to as soon as possible.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The chaos of the previous Government did extraordinary damage to this country on the international stage, and frankly it sullied our international reputation. I am pleased that the Leader of the Opposition at least understands the chaos that the Conservatives caused our economy. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: this Government take a completely different approach. We were elected on a manifesto that we will now seek to deliver.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers to all our questions—he always replies in a positive fashion. As for my question, he probably

[Jim Shannon]

knows what is coming, but I will ask it anyway. The thorn in the side of any restoration of good faith with the EU lies in the abhorrent Northern Ireland protocol and the EU's grip on Northern Ireland. That may well exclude Northern Ireland from any trade deals with the United States of America, with which we already have multimillion pound supply deals in place. Will the Minister confirm that allowing Northern Ireland to have her place in the United Kingdom, and an end to the game that is hurting the people of Northern Ireland both financially and constitutionally, are at the top of the agenda for good relations?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I would like to reassure the hon. Gentleman that Northern Ireland is always at the forefront of my mind. Since I came into office, I have visited Belfast twice; I chair the inter-ministerial group, which obviously includes the Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland; and the Windsor framework taskforce sits within the Cabinet Office, so I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the interests of the people of Northern Ireland are fundamental to this Government. I would also suggest to him that successful negotiation of a sanitary and phytosanitary agreement would be of significant benefit to the people of Northern Ireland.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I welcome the Paymaster General's statement today. I notice that he said that there are currently no plans for a youth mobility scheme with the European Union. As a former Erasmus student myself, may I urge him to look at the schemes that are already in place with countries ranging from South Korea to Uruguay, Australia and New Zealand, and the immense cultural, economic and societal benefits that come from those schemes, which do not rub up against the Government's red lines on single market access, customs union membership or freedom of movement?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, and if we look back over recent decades, there have been many people in this House who have had the benefit of studying abroad. As my hon. Friend has also pointed to, though, the red lines upon which this Government were elected are fundamental.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Paymaster General for that statement.

Backbench Business

Coalfield Communities

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. This is a very well-subscribed debate, so there will be an immediate time limit of five minutes for Back-Bench contributions. That, of course, does not apply to the mover of the debate, but I hope he bears that comment in mind.

1.21 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for coalfield communities.

Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. As ever, I will seek to follow your instructions, as gently as they were put. I am grateful for the opportunity to lead this debate this afternoon, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it time. It will give Members of this House the opportunity to make the case for the coalfield communities up and down our United Kingdom to get the opportunities, investment, focus and support that they need and deserve.

Newcastle-under-Lyme is nestled within the north Staffordshire coalfield. Our ancient and loyal borough has a rich history that is intertwined with coalmining. In the early 20th century, our coalfield supported more than 50 pits, employing more than 20,000 men and boys. Newcastle-under-Lyme was home to several notable collieries, including Silverdale colliery, which was among the last deep mines in the area and closed in December 1998. The pit wheel monument stands proud as a reminder of the past and gives hope for the future. We also have the Minnie pit monuments up in Audley, in the northern part of my constituency.

Just a fortnight ago, I was privileged to have the opportunity to attend the commemorative events to mark the 130th anniversary of the Diglake colliery disaster, which took place in Bignall End in Newcastle-under-Lyme on 14 January 1895. That disaster saw 77 men and boys lose their lives, and is commemorated every year. It was a wonderful opportunity to reflect and remember, and I am very grateful to the Reverend Joy Ventom and the church wardens, led by Bob Alcock, at Audley Methodist church for hosting such a brilliant weekend of remembrance, featuring the excellent Audley brass band.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this really important debate. He is reflecting on the historic past of the coalfields, which is absolutely integral to any of us who represent coalfield communities. However, does he agree that what people in the coalfields want is not mainly a focus on their past, but a Government with a sense of ambition for their future? What we really need to see in the coalfields is that the Government's industrial strategy recognises the unique contribution that they can make, so that we can focus on a bright future for our coalfields as well as our proud past.

Adam Jogee: I thank my hon. Friend. During the election campaign, he came to support me and saw many of the communities to which I am referring, and

I agree with him wholeheartedly. It is important that we know where we have come from, but it is more important that we set the path to where we want to go.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme on securing this debate. Through his wife if nothing else, he will know the strong industrial connections with coalmining at Ballycastle and Coalisland—the name is a giveaway. Some of those rocks are some 330 million years old. Does the hon. Member agree that while these issues are devolved, it is crucial that we have a joint UK strategy to protect our coalmining towns and villages across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Adam Jogee: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. My wife is a wise and wonderful woman, so he will be reassured to know that I learn lots from her. I agree that we are one United Kingdom, and that this issue requires one approach.

At the commemoration last month to which I referred, the order of service contained a poem from Captain John William Roberts, whose grandfather died in the disaster and whose daughter, Maisie Farrell, was at the memorial with me despite suffering a stroke in recent months. I am pleased to say that she is on the road to recovery. Staffordshire women are made of strong stuff—I should know, as I was born to one—and I wish Maisie well in her recovery to full health. It just so happens that Maisie is Newcastle-under-Lyme born and bred, and is a close friend of my family. I want to share a small part of that poem with the House:

“Diglake Disaster:

That bitter day in January, Christmas not long gone

We went to work joking and singing—clogs echoing to mirth

How could we guess early, subterranean Niagara sweep lads away

By the nature of its vector, trap mates without escape?

While we struggled in icy water, choked for clear air, agony of heart,

Burning in our mind we were separated for ever from loved ones.

This mixed group of men, not able to see Easter—”

It ends,

“Bequeath our generation acts, they knew we could perform—

Advancing wisdom, better leaders, unselfish goals

Thus, take up the human charter: embrace our task.

The words of Captain John William Roberts, ACF.”

What a tribute those words are to the sacrifice of those men and boys who died, and to the shared experience of miners right across our United Kingdom, from South Wales to the east midlands and from Yorkshire to the jewel in our kingdom’s crown in north Staffordshire. Those miners worked hard, they powered our economy, and they showed what grit, determination, dignity, strength and commitment look like. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) alluded to, we have a duty to give back to the communities that gave us the men and boys, and the strong women right beside them, without whom our country would never have developed in the way that it has.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con) *rose*—

Carolyn Harris (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab) *rose*—

Adam Jogee: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) first, because I am smart, and then I will give way to the right hon. Member from Scotland.

Carolyn Harris: Very wise.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I am being contacted by a growing number of mineworker constituents who were enrolled in the British Coal staff superannuation scheme, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare (Gerald Jones), and all those constituents are understandably disappointed that they have not received the same justice as their former colleagues in the mineworkers pension scheme. That inequality is unfair, particularly as almost 5,000 women who worked in the industry and who were paid less were in the British Coal staff superannuation scheme. Does my hon. Friend agree that urgent action is needed to bring some parity to the situation?

Adam Jogee: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, and I will touch gently on that issue. Her intervention speaks to her commitment to standing up for those most in need of a strong voice.

I will now happily give way to my friend from Scotland.

David Mundell: I commend the hon. Member on securing this debate. I agree 100% with the hon. Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). I have many constituents who are in exactly the same position, although the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) did not mention Scotland, which has a proud mining tradition. Communities in my constituency, such as Sanquhar, Kirkconnel, Kelloholm, Coalburn and the Douglas valley, have often felt very overlooked. Does the hon. Member agree that often in these communities, people are still forward-looking, wanting to make those communities turn around and be regenerated? They have not given up on them, and the Government—in London and in Edinburgh—should not either.

Adam Jogee: I am grateful to my friend from Scotland for making that point. I look forward to working with him, and to his supporting the Government as we seek to do exactly as he said—get these communities back on track, in the place and with the support that they need and deserve.

Last Friday, I met the widow and two of the five daughters of the late Jimmy Flynn at the weekly coffee morning at St Giles’ church in Newcastle-under-Lyme. I hope that one day, you will join me there, Madam Deputy Speaker—they do a good fry in the morning. [*Interruption.*] Not quite an Ulster fry, but we look forward to joining the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for one of those soon. Mr Flynn was a miner, and over a cuppa, his widow and daughters told me about his life, his work, and the fact that their dad and their husband—alongside all those who worked down the pit—worked “bloody hard every day.” That they did.

I cannot talk about Newcastle-under-Lyme’s mining history without celebrating the fantastic Apedale heritage centre, which is on the site of a former coalmine. I also want to acknowledge the Apedale valley light railway;

[Adam Jogee]

I very much enjoyed riding on a steam train on a recent visit. Despite the coalmines ceasing to operate, their legacy remains an integral part of my community, our heritage and the lived experience. That legacy reflects a community built on hard work and industrial prowess by good people, driven by decency, respect, strength and skill. I am proud to honour the memories of those who went before us, and to represent their descendants and their ambitions in this place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) has had to head home to meet workers at Royal Stafford, who have had bad news this week. He has asked me to pay tribute to the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, which has supported a number of community organisations in his constituency.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), who has been a steadfast and diligent champion of former miners and coalfield communities up and down our United Kingdom. It has been a pleasure working with him, and with Sophie Jackson in his office—and with my team, since my election to this place—on getting justice for members of the mineworkers pension scheme, which my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) mentioned. I thank the Prime Minister and all those on the Front Bench for the leadership that they have shown. I want to acknowledge Professor Steve Fothergill and Chris Whitwood for the excellent work that they do supporting the Labour group of coalfield MPs—a group on which I lead for the west midlands.

Some 5.7 million people live in Britain's coalfields—one in 10 people in England and Scotland, and one in four people in Wales—but almost half of coalfield communities are among the 30% most deprived communities in the United Kingdom. Yesterday, I had a very helpful discussion with Tash and Roshni from the Local Trust. We talked through the figures in my community—in Cross Heath, Knutton and Silverdale, where the challenge of tackling injustice and inequality is most serious for us locally, just as it is serious in places across the country. I would be grateful if the Minister touched on the community wealth fund, and how we can ensure that money from it is directed at supporting disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Where will the money go, and how will it be allocated?

Education has such an important role to play. I was at St Thomas Boughey school in Halmer End last week, and I heard about the challenges that it faces when it comes to funding, staff recruitment and retention, and ensuring that the smart young people who go to the school can work and live in, and contribute to, the community in which they were raised. I look forward to welcoming some of those young people to Parliament later this month. My community has a university, Keele University. How do we build a bridge between the funding that universities can attract and young people who want to study in the community that they live in?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East said, we need justice for the British Coal staff superannuation scheme members, and I have told the Prime Minister this directly. The BCSSS has more than 40,000 members who formerly worked in the mining industry, including a number of my constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme, and I have promised that I will fight their corner. I urge Ministers to speed up efforts to

transfer the £2.3 billion investment reserve in the BCSSS to the members who earned it, deserve it and need it, as more and more former miners die each year. That is important, because a significant number of BCSSS members were required to transfer to the BCSSS, as we have heard. If they had not been forced to move, they would have had access to their own money when this new Labour Government made the right call on the MPS. They deserve it, and this Government, although they have been in power for only a few short months, must now get on with it. I will do whatever I can to help. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield said, we want real action, not empty words; we want a proper commitment, not hollow promises; and we want our communities properly invested in, not forgotten. A new Government with a majority of this size presents us with an opportunity to finally get the settlement we need, the focus my constituents deserve, and the future my constituents have earned.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent opening speech on a topic that is so important for all our communities. I am sure that he is as shocked as I am to learn of the severe health inequalities in coalfield communities; the average life expectancy is around a year less than the national average, and around three years less than that in the south-east. For the north-east, it is even worse. Does he agree that for these communities, these health inequalities are the long-term legacy, and that is why we need to ensure that coalfield communities are properly supported, even in this day?

Adam Jogee: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, who is 100% correct. I am looking forward to working with her to make sure that we get the progress that we all want to see, up and down the country.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am mindful of your instruction, but I want to touch briefly on four issues that I know many colleagues will expand on, and I want to leave time, believe it or not, for everyone else to have their say. First, on worklessness, a common assumption is that unemployment, however defined, is no longer a problem. So far as the former coalfields are concerned, this simply is not true, but the nature of the unemployment problem facing communities such as ours has changed. In the 1980s and 1990s, in the wake of pit closures, there were large numbers of people out of work on unemployment-related benefits. These days, as the Department for Work and Pensions data presented in “The State of the Coalfields 2024” report showed, an exceptionally large number of people out of work are on other benefits.

Across former coalfield communities such as mine, 16% of all adults of working age are out of work on benefits. The biggest number is those who are out of work on incapacity benefits—there are just over 400,000 people in that situation in former coalfields across the country, and people in that group account for around one in nine of all adults of working age. That goes to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson). It reflects poor health—I mentioned health inequalities in the House this week—but also hidden unemployment, because in parts of the country where good jobs are more readily available, many of those with health problems or disabilities are able to secure such jobs. Estimates from Sheffield Hallam University point to a real level of

unemployment in the former coalfields that is double the rate in south-east England, which says everything that we need to know.

A consequence of the shortfall in local job opportunities is a reliance on commuting to neighbouring areas and further afield. Net out-commuting from the former coalfields—the balance between flows in each direction—accounts for about 350,000 people. The jobs available in former coalfields also tend to be less well paid, with 53% of employed residents working in manual jobs compared with a GB average of 46%, and just 36% here in the capital. It is important to note that the average hourly earnings of coalfield residents are around 6% lower than the national average, as we have heard. We have serious work to do. My challenge to those on the Front Bench is this: we need stronger policies focused on growing the local economy in former coalfields, including by tackling high levels of economic inactivity.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this really important debate. Would he agree that the example of Nissan, in the neighbouring constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), shows that when high-quality manufacturing jobs are put into former coalfield areas, people from those areas are among the most widely respected workforces in the world? Global investors think that they are among the best workforces they can get. The tragedy is that there are not more companies like Nissan in former coalmining areas.

Adam Jogee: My hon. Friend is right. Those workforces are not just respected; they are brilliant, skilled, smart and hard-working. They deserve the opportunities that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield have noted, and that I know all colleagues in this House want to see.

My point about policies to tackle high levels of economic inactivity leads me to the next important issue when it comes to improving Government support for coalfield communities, which is local growth funding. We all want to see our economy grow, and the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have my support in pushing that agenda, but growth must be driven and shared across all parts of our United Kingdom. As the Government prepare for the spending review, I urge those on the Front Bench to ensure that, at the very least, present spending is maintained.

The primary focus of local growth funding needs to be economic development and regeneration, driven by a mix of investment in people, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst), in place, in infrastructure and in business support. The investment in our communities should be fairly allocated on the basis of need, not competitive bidding, and there should be full and timely consultation on the allocation formula. Funding needs to be allocated over a longer term than was the case under previous Governments. The commitment in the Budget to setting five-year capital budgets, to be extended every two years at regular spending reviews, is a welcome step.

The Government's intention to rationalise the number of local growth funds is also welcome, because it makes sense to allocate funding at the sub-regional level at which most local economies operate. Some will be surprised to hear me say this, but in some ways we need

less government. We need a lighter touch in managing this vital funding. The expertise, knowledge and experience of local people and local leaders, including elected mayors—the Minister will enjoy my saying that, for once—should be respected, and they should be given greater discretion, within a broader framework set by the Government.

Mrs Hodgson: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Adam Jogee: I will, but I am getting the look already.

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend has mentioned commuting and infrastructure. Following on from the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst), those things are important in connecting people from Durham to jobs in Washington at Nissan, and at other great companies there, such as Rolls-Royce and BAE Systems. Does he agree that there has been under-investment for years in the infrastructure that he is talking about, and especially in transport infrastructure, which makes projects such as the Leamside line, which our Mayor of the North-East supports, so important for creating the connectivity that we need?

Adam Jogee: My hon. Friend is correct. We were talking about less government. As the Minister knows, I have some concerns about local government reorganisation, and I look forward to speaking to him about that in greater detail. That said, I call on all local leaders in Staffordshire to engage with the subject seriously, respectfully and wisely. As we have heard from interventions, we need to focus on the livelihoods of the many, not the jobs and power plays of the elected few.

I turn to the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation, a national body that should not be confused with local miners' welfare institutes, which are independent charities. Concerns about CISWO have been aired on several occasions by a number of colleagues. I have met members of its board and its chief executive, and it would be wrong for those concerns not to be noted in the debate. I urge the CISWO leadership to consider how they might better support local welfare schemes when they run into difficulty, including looking at recycling funds locally when land and property is sold off, and at how CISWO might engage better with local authorities to support regeneration initiatives in former mining communities.

The Coalfields Regeneration Trust got to work in 1999 in response to recommendations made by the coalfields taskforce, which was established by the late Lord Prescott. As we know, Lord Prescott was laid to rest last week, and I acknowledge his service to our country. The trust's focus over the last 25 years has been to support communities living with the consequences of the rapid mine closure programme that took place from the mid-1980s onwards, under the Government of Mrs Thatcher. It has invested hundreds of millions of pounds, reaching over 2 million people with community projects and activities aimed at improving health, skills and employment opportunities. It also supports thousands of vital community assets and organisations.

Between 1999 and 2015, the CRT received funding from the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments for its work. It continues to receive funding from the Scottish and Welsh Governments, although that has reduced in recent years, but it no longer gets funding from the UK Government. That has had a huge impact on its ability

[Adam Jogee]

to deliver across England, and resulted in a significant reduction in its programmes of support. Where the previous Conservative Government failed, I urge this new Labour Government to deliver. I urge Ministers to look at a sustainable, long-term and comprehensive package of funding for the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. Will the Minister arrange for me, my hon. Friend the Member for Easington, and the Coalfields Regeneration Trust to meet relevant Ministers at the earliest opportunity?

Today I want to honour the proud and rich history of mining in Newcastle-under-Lyme and north Staffordshire—a region where generations of hard-working men and women carved out a legacy of resilience, determination, and community. I want us to remember the huge potential, and the brilliant people who deserve the highest-quality public services. They deserve the investment and focus that our big cities get, and they deserve a Government who will never walk by on the other side. This debate gives us a chance to reflect on the past, and to invest in the future. As we remember the miners who risked their life every day, we acknowledge the role that they played in shaping the industrial strength of my region and the nation as a whole. Their sacrifices remind us of the value of hard work, perseverance, and the unyielding spirit of north Staffordshire and our United Kingdom. We have a responsibility to lead where they left off, and we have no time to waste.

1.43 pm

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): I refer Members to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I was a miner from the age of 17 until I came to this place—a period of over 30 years—and I also have a connection with the National Union of Mineworkers.

It will be crystal clear from this debate that there is an absolute need to continue with support for the coalfield communities, whether that is the Orgreave truth and justice campaign, the pardoning of the sacked miners, CISWO—a fantastic charity that needs a complete and utter overhaul—the MPS, or whether it is looking again at the BCSSS scheme, the general social deprivation and poverty in the communities, or the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. Those issues will be covered in much more detail by my hon. Friends, but I want to take the time I have to paint a picture and take people back to the proud past, because we in the coalfield communities are very proud of our past.

The communities were built from the wage packets of the miners. What we have lost is something we have to describe today, as well as what we want back to fulfil that pride in our communities and the people we proudly represent. We were the people who fuelled the industrial revolution, and the communities were savagely destroyed by a Government driven by political ideology. There was little that the collieries did not touch, and when I left school there was pretty much full employment. When the schools opened their gates, the pits opened theirs. Following in the footsteps of our forebears, we felt like we were contributing to the wealth of the nation—we really were contributing to the wealth of this nation, and many paid the ultimate sacrifice in doing so.

People were given the finest apprenticeships you could ever imagine—qualifications in working underground that could be transferred across the globe, and training in skills that no piece of paper could ever quantify. I

learned from the very best. My education from the age of 17 was from miners with huge intellect. Most were without a single written qualification, and written off as uneducated by people who should know better, but these were absolute working-class geniuses, believe me.

It did not stop at political debate. The men who we looked up to imparted to us many life skills. They taught us the value of work. I am talking about miners underground who taught the younger generation coming through about the value of work, the value of contributing to our local communities, and the perils of stepping out of line. The coalfields largely policed themselves, and if you got into trouble on a night out, you were in trouble when you went back to work. Employment at the pit gave miners and their families the security of a colliery house—good-quality terraced housing that stretched the length of the communities, and all owned by the coal board. With decent rents, those houses were kept in good order and gave the security of a home to miners. Those are basic things, and local communities, coalfield communities, are now suffering greatly because of the huge loss.

The communities had a thriving social scene, and if someone wanted to wet their whistle, there were plenty of places where they could have a pint. The clubs are gone—clubland has disappeared, miners' welfares are disappearing, and we have to get something back. The communities enjoyed a whole host of pursuits, whether that was whippet racing, pigeon fancying, leek growing, onion growing, billiards, pigeon racing, jazz bands, brass bands—it was amazing what the miners were able to contribute to this country. That is why we need specific intervention from the Government into those coalfield communities that are dying on their feet. We should never forget the contribution that coalfield communities delivered to the country, often at a great cost, and they really need that levelling-up that is constantly promised.

1.48 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I congratulate my good and hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) on securing this important debate on coalfield communities. It is very oversubscribed, and I wish we had more time. I thank the Backbench Business Committee, the Industrial Communities Alliance, Coalfields Regeneration Trust, and the House of Commons Library for the useful briefing paper it produced. I also thank my fellow coalfield MPs for their sterling work on behalf of their constituents.

Our mining communities not only have a proud past, but with the right leadership and investment we have an exciting future. After 14 years of Conservative Government, coalfield communities have been left grappling with relentless austerity and a rigged levelling-up agenda, which in practice meant that resources never reached the places in my community that needed them most.

Today, I want to talk not only about the challenges that our communities face, but the potential within them to drive economic growth, attract investment and create jobs that can transform lives and revitalise local economies. Some 30 years after the pit closures, the talent, resilience and ambition of our coalfield communities remains undiminished. It is not just about righting the wrongs of the past, but harnessing the energy in the community to build a stronger, greener and more prosperous economy.

I must say something about the British Coal staff superannuation scheme. To their credit, my Government—this Labour Government—have already demonstrated their commitment to coalfield communities. For too long, successive Governments have denied pension justice to retired miners and their widows. Money that should have been providing security in retirement was instead filling the Treasury's coffers.

Mr Perkins: My hon. Friend generously thanked coalfield MPs, but I would like to repay the compliment to him, because his leadership on the mineworkers pension scheme has been exemplary. We are all happy to support him as the chair of the APPG. I put on record how important a part he played in that significant commitment that this Government made.

Grahame Morris: My hon. Friend is kind and generous, and I thank him for that, but this is not about me; it is about the communities we represent.

We have to give credit that, at the recent Budget, the Chancellor righted the wrong on miners' pensions and the MPS and delivered on Labour's manifesto commitment on the mineworkers pension scheme surplus. The decision to transfer the MPS investment reserve fund was a moral obligation, and it resulted in an economic boost. In my constituency, the decision is injecting £5.6 million into the local economy every year through increased pension payments to the 3,755 MPS members—retired miners and widows—in east Durham. That money is now being spent in our high streets, local shops, cafés and pubs, boosting the economy, creating jobs and supporting growth. However, this pension justice issue is only partially settled. There is a similar issue with the British Coal staff superannuation scheme, which has 40,000 beneficiaries who are former British Coal staff and their widows. Since 1994, the Government have taken out £3.1 billion from that scheme, without contributing a penny.

I say with all respect to the Minister, and specifically to the Treasury, that it is time to release the £2.3 billion BCSSS investment reserve, so that all former mining staff can receive a pension uplift. Time is of the essence. Thousands of retired miners have already died, with 2,000 in the BCSSS passing away each year, including many women who were among the lowest-paid workers in the coal industry, having worked in pit canteens like my mother, or in administration and auxiliary roles. When we say numbers, they are meaningless, perhaps, to civil servants and ministerial advisers, but I know these men and women. They are men like Eamon Kavanagh, now in his 80s, who was an absolute stalwart, not just of Murton colliery, but the Seaham collieries; Bill Waites, who was a good friend of my late father; and my dear mother, who is 88. Time is of the essence to settle this issue. It is about fairness, pension justice and putting money back into communities that powered an industrial revolution that made Britain great, fuelled economic growth, and were the foundations on which our nation's wealth was built.

On a positive note, we are moving from coal to clean energy. We can lead the green industrial revolution. The closure of the coalmines marked the end of an era, but just as we powered the last industrial revolution, it is now time for our communities to lead the next one, as we transition to a clean and green economy. Indeed, in east Durham, we have already been laying the foundations

for this future. Mine water heat, an innovative low-carbon energy solution, is being developed in Seaham and Horden. If properly supported, it could provide sufficient heat for all properties in the UK's coalfield areas, offering a sustainable and affordable alternative to traditional energy. Then there is Power Roll, a start-up based on the Jade enterprise park in Murton that is pioneering lightweight, flexible solar technology that does not rely on rare earth metals. This is British innovation at its finest, ready for reinvestment to scale up production in a gigafactory. With the right support, we can create new green-collar jobs. We have heard about white collar and blue collar; let us have green-collar jobs and position the UK as a global leader in renewable technology.

1.54 pm

Jade Botterill (Ossett and Denby Dale) (Lab): I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) for securing this important debate. I am proud to see so many colleagues speaking so passionately about their communities. Despite years of under-investment from the Conservatives, most of whom could not be bothered to show up to the debate today, it is nice to see people on the Government Benches who feel the same commitment to rejuvenating their communities and, importantly, to celebrating the social, economic and cultural contributions of the areas we have grown up in and now have the privilege of representing.

I was there when Kellingley, the last deep pit in the UK, closed a week before Christmas back in 2015. I spoke to some of the 450 miners who had been made redundant, whose fathers and grandfathers had worked down the pit. The devastating, ruthless impact of closures was clearer to me that day than ever before. The mine was not just a place of work, but the heart of the community. Built around it were schools, sports teams, brass bands, social clubs, places of worship, families, friendships, hope, security and prosperity. When Kellingley closed, I saw on the faces of the men and their families the fear that the death of the industry would take the community and the culture with it—the culture and the industry of his father, and his father before him. However, they rejected victimhood. The next day, the miners, the families, their friends and their community marched together and met at the miners' welfare club.

For too long, people in post-industrial northern towns were promised nothing but empty slogans. Successive Conservative Governments ignored them, neglected them and insulted them, but they refused to be forgotten. Although Kellingley is not in my constituency, many mines like it were closed in similar circumstances and with similar results right across Ossett and Denby Dale. I cannot help but imagine that the scenes were similar on each occasion. Caphouse colliery in my constituency closed in 1985. In that refusal to be forgotten, the mine was converted into a museum, conceived, created and now staffed by ex-miners. It is run by Lynn Dunning, who embodies the often-forgotten role of women during the strikes. We must remember those who helped heat our nation for generations. With good old Yorkshire miners taking people down the shaft at the mining museum, there is not a better place to remember our rich industrial history.

Yes, that is a plug to visit the National Coal Mining Museum in my constituency. It remains a place where we are reminded of our community's contribution to this country. Every time I visit, I am filled with pride,

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anger and determination: pride in my region's national contribution and the spirit of hard work, humour and solidarity still present in the ex-miners who remain there today; anger at the arrogance and ignorance of previous Governments who decimated our communities without a thought for what would come next; and determination to change this great injustice and to give our community not just what it needs, but what it has earned.

We do not need to just preserve the legacy of coalfield communities; we must also fight for the dignity of retired miners who made that proud legacy possible. Other Members have spoken eloquently about the action taken to end the historical injustice of mineworkers and their pensions, which former mineworkers in my patch often raise with me. My hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Keir Mather) has been fighting for his constituent, Tony Rock, whose compensation case in the past few years has been delayed and delayed by the Department for Work and Pensions as his health worsens. That sort of case must become a thing of the past, and my Labour colleagues and I will keep fighting until retired members across Yorkshire receive the dignity in retirement they deserve. I know that this Government share that feeling and are acting, and I was proud to run on a manifesto that made a concrete commitment to miners and mining communities.

This Government's approach must go further, and does, to revive these communities for generations to come. That is why we are investing in schools and hospitals, roads and rail, high streets and homes. We are restoring pride in our town centres, combating antisocial behaviour and crime. We are financing the green industries of the future to ensure that what happened to the mineworkers never happens again. We are committed to growing the economy in towns right across our country, and not just London. As people in my area know all too well, strong communities must be nurtured generation after generation, but people in post-industrial northern towns such as mine often feel ignored and forgotten by the powerful. It is my job in the House to ensure that those thoughts and feelings are heard. I am committed to never treating them with the same injustice they experienced at the hands of uncaring, short-termist Conservative Governments.

2 pm

Kenneth Stevenson (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I am pleased that we have the opportunity to debate such important matters. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) for securing the time and commend him on an excellent speech.

In the villages and towns that make up the wonderful constituency of Airdrie and Shotts, a common theme consistently arises when knocking on doors: the memory of coalmining, the community spirit and cohesion that existed, and the suffering and devastation felt as a consequence of the cruel Tory policy of rapid deindustrialisation. Airdrie and Shotts, like other constituencies we have heard mentioned, sat at the centre of an industrial heartland: in this case, central Scotland. In such communities, young men and women entered skilled employment in their own home town. We are asking the Government to support further the regeneration of coalfield communities, using modern educational and employment techniques, in the hope that that will become a reality once again.

The working people of Airdrie and Shotts have been treated as an afterthought for too long. They have been let down by Conservative and SNP Governments who acted in self-interest rather than the interests of the nation. I am delighted that we now have a Government who will ensure that the people of Airdrie and Shotts can mark the legacy of its coalmining past but strengthen, modernise and deliver a more prosperous future.

In my family, we remember my late grandfather Jimmy Stevenson, who worked down the pits for over 40 years; my late father-in-law Drew McCracken, who worked in mines across central Scotland for 40 years, scrambling and digging in 18-inch seams, and who carried his brother up the mine after he was killed; and my brother-in-law Derek McCracken, who worked for 10 years in the mines around Plains and Caldercruix. We owe it to them and the other miners to create a new future.

It often goes unnoticed that the inequality faced in former coalfields is staggering. While there are many means of measuring the scale of challenge facing former coalfields, I found particular interest in a figure provided in "The State of the Coalfields 2024". It highlights that Ayrshire and Lanarkshire, which were analysed together for the purposes of the report, was the joint lowest area for jobs for people of working age, with 44 employee jobs for every 100 working-age people. Indeed, Ayrshire and Lanarkshire witness an above average out-of-work benefit claimant rate and are identified in the report as areas where extensive deprivation exists. That is a direct consequence of 14 years of Tory Government: they deepened the inequalities that have scarred constituencies such as mine for decades.

However, Scotland as a whole is a country where health inequality is felt on an unimaginable scale, where the inequalities are deep and divisive in equal measure and where there is no worse time to be poor and in need of healthcare. With one in 14 people in Airdrie and Shotts alone in bad or very bad health, the former coalfields that I represent are held back by ill health because of a Scottish Government who have allowed NHS waiting lists to soar. Almost one in six Scots are waiting, waiting and waiting.

There is no doubt that the challenges facing my constituents are significant. There are social and economic barriers, because Governments have not undertaken anywhere near enough work to break them down, but I firmly believe in the potential of Airdrie and Shotts and its people. It is a constituency with skilled workers, talented young people full of potential and an older generation who remember its industrial and coalmining past while wanting the best for its future.

I thank the Coalfields Regeneration Trust for the work it does to raise awareness of the struggles faced in constituencies such as Airdrie and Shotts. I must also thank the UK Labour Government for delivering a Budget that sees Scotland receive its largest funding since devolution and a pay rise for working people across my constituency. I look forward to working with the Minister and others to regenerate former coalfields and constituencies such as mine. I encourage the Government to work closely with the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, which does excellent work in our communities, as we embark on a plan for change, away from the years of social, economic and health barriers blocking the progress of our former coalfield communities.

2.4 pm

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jodge) for securing this important and timely debate. I echo his comments about our hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for his work championing our coalfield communities, which, until this Government were elected, had been forgotten.

I speak as the proud daughter of a former coalminer on behalf of the coalfield communities in Amber Valley and thousands of former coal industry workers across the country. My dad and the constituents of Amber Valley have a common link: a rich mining heritage. Whether it is constituents like John Edwards from Heanor, Colin Smith from Langley Mill or Ian Walker from Ripley, all parts of Amber Valley share this common bond. Our communities were built on the hard work and dedication of our mineworkers, engineers, technicians and support staff who powered our nation through challenging times, often at great personal risk.

In October, we saw long-overdue justice served for the members of the mineworkers pension scheme when the Government agreed to return its £1.5 billion investment reserve. That decision resulted in a well-deserved 32% increase in pensions, and an average increase of £29 a week for each member. That is already improving the lives of many of the former 772 mineworkers in Amber Valley. It has directly benefited my family, too, and I know that it means a lot to my dad to get that recognition. However, the same cannot be said about the members of the British Coal staff superannuation scheme. The hard work of those engineers, technicians and support staff ensured that men like my dad who went down the pits every day returned safely to the surface. Indeed, some members of the BCSSS also worked underground.

We have done right by the MPS men who went down the pits, but have we truly supported the women, who were often paid less than their male counterparts and are an equal part of the coalfield communities? As my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) pointed out, women in the coal industry—the majority of whom are BCSSS members—deserve pension justice, too.

The parallels between the MPS and the BCSSS are obvious. Both schemes were established during the privatisation of British Coal in 1994, with the Government acting as guarantor, yet while the MPS members have seen their investment reserve rightly returned, BCSSS members such as my constituents John, Colin and Ian continue to wait. The trustees of the BCSSS have formally requested the return of the £2.3 billion investment reserve. That request is not only reasonable but consistent with the precedent set by the MPS decision. This is a matter not just of financial contribution but of justice, fairness and honouring the contributions of all those who helped build our nation's energy infrastructure.

I urge the Government to act swiftly and decisively. Let us commit to a full review of the BCSSS surplus sharing agreements and transfer the investment reserve to its rightful owners: the scheme members. That action would provide a significant boost to the pensions of more than 40,000 former coal industry staff, enhancing their financial security and quality of life in retirement. I urge the Government to consider quick action, as many in receipt of those pensions are in their 80s or older. It is

heartbreaking that thousands of miners, including colleagues of my dad, did not live long enough to receive the benefit of the MPS surplus. I know my father would not want his colleagues, who kept him safe and supported him, to be forgotten. I urge the Government to consider righting this historic inequality, so that all members of our coalfield communities get the justice that they deserve.

2.9 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is an honour to speak in this debate as the Member of Parliament for Cannock Chase, an area deeply proud of its mining heritage. Collieries were our dominant industry from the mid-19th century right up until the early 1990s. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jodge) on securing this debate and enabling us to speak on behalf of our coalfield communities. As a fellow Staffordshire MP, I know that he is a dedicated advocate for the town and villages that he represents. He referred to the Diglake mining disaster; in Cannock Chase on 1 October we will mark the 95th anniversary of the Grove colliery disaster in the North Lanes area of Norton Canes, which claimed the lives of 14 men.

My constituents are rightly proud of where they live. Often, generations remain in the area for their whole lives, which shows the real sense of community and local identity. However, my constituents often tell me that we desperately need investment in the bread-and-butter infrastructure that supports thriving communities, such as capacity at GPs, dentists and primary schools, good quality roads and regeneration of our town centres. Regeneration is vital because in all too many coalfield communities there is still a feeling that, decades on, we have not all recovered from the rapid destruction of the coalmining industry in the 1980s and 1990s.

At the 2019 general election, many of my constituents were tempted by the siren song of levelling up from the then Prime Minister. My constituents have been crying out for the promise of big-bang regeneration across communities such as mine for a very long time. Our main town of Cannock was successful in securing £20 million from the levelling-up fund in 2021, but the reality of the fund has been far more complex than even my local council envisaged four years ago. First of all, its rigidity in awarding funding to one town pits communities against one another and does not reflect the more balanced approach to regeneration that councils such as mine would take if given the freedom. Secondly, the focus on large, complex and therefore risky projects with fixed budgets, coupled with high inflation, has forced councils with LUF projects to repeatedly re-evaluate what they can deliver.

On several occasions, Members will have heard me raise the plight of the Prince of Wales theatre in Cannock and the Museum of Cannock Chase in Hednesford, which are threatened with closure. The museum, based in the buildings of the former Valley colliery, is a much-loved hub for our proud mining heritage. Our theatre is playing its part in keeping our heritage alive, too, such as in the new play “The Tunnellers”, which tells the story of the heroic men of the tunnelling companies in the first world war, many of whom worked on the Cannock Chase coalfield.

A redevelopment of our theatre was to be at the heart of our LUF project, but the effects of inflation to have forced the council to scale back the project, and the

[Josh Newbury]

theatre is now set to close. Fortunately, a fantastic group of residents have formed a community interest company with a view to taking on the Prince of Wales. I pay tribute to them and, as I stated at a public meeting that I organised last Friday, I will continue to work shoulder to shoulder with them to secure a bright, sustainable future for the theatre, and our museum, too. I very much hope that our council will use the levelling-up funds to help secure the long-term future of the theatre.

The difficulties faced by Cannock's LUF project underline the flaws of the funding model. I am encouraged to see this Government's commitment to replacing the dog-eat-dog bidding wars with a system based on need and what our communities want. Alongside my colleagues, I hope to see coalfield communities benefit from local growth funding, maintained at the current level at least, long-term funding that does not lead to a rapid dash to spend by arbitrary deadlines, and the genuine empowerment of local councils, which will always know their communities better than Whitehall.

Finally, the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, which has done fantastic work in our communities for 25 years, was forced by the previous Government to become a self-financing charity. Despite the inevitable scaling back of its capacity to invest, its brilliant model of generating income from building new industrial units for small and medium-sized businesses in coalfield communities is enabling it to carry on its fantastic work. The CRT's objectives and investments perfectly align with this Government's ambition for economic growth that is spread right across the country while bearing down on the barriers that all too often affect coalfield communities more than most.

Our communities, which once powered the nation, are bursting with potential and passionate, hard-working people with a diverse range of skills and a pride in our past, strengthened by hope for the future. I am proud to be part of a Labour Government who are once again unleashing that potential for the good of the people we all represent.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. After the next speaker, the time limit on speeches will be reduced to four minutes.

2.14 pm

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I thank my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jodge), for securing this debate.

Stafford also has a proud coalfield history. Many of my constituents were miners, who dedicated their lives to the mining industry both below and above ground. Today, like many hon. Members, I want to highlight my constituents who are members of the British Coal staff superannuation scheme, the BCSSS. At the general election, I was proud to stand on a platform that recognised the injustice of the mineworkers pension scheme. Following the election, I was delighted that swift action was taken to return the investment reserve to its rightful owners.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), I believe that the BCSSS is worth reviewing. It shares many of the same characteristics as

the mineworkers pension scheme and has equally deserving members. I particularly want to highlight the nearly 5,000 women in the mining industry, the majority of whom were in the BCSSS. They were often among the lowest paid in the mining industry, but their contribution should not be overlooked. They deserve the same financial security and recognition in later life as their male colleagues.

The Minister has stated that the Government will review the BCSSS after the arrangements with MPS trustees have been agreed. I am so appreciative that the Government are open to exploring the scheme, I am contacted daily by constituents, desperately asking for clarity on the process. I hope that discussions will take place soon, but more directly, I am calling for transparency on timescales so that I can reassure my constituents that this is a priority for our Government.

2.16 pm

Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): I thank all Members who were involved in bringing forward this debate, including my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jodge).

The coastal coalfield of west Cumbria stretches 14 miles from Whitehaven up the coast to Maryport. The coal seams in my constituency were mined for over 420 years before the last mine closed in the 1980s. The miners and collieries of west Cumbria helped to fuel Britain's economy for centuries and sparked numerous innovations. Entire towns and communities in my constituency were built out of the coal, iron and steel industries.

Our mining history is, however, also marked by terrible tragedy. Over 1,700 men, women and children are estimated to have been killed while mining coal in Whitehaven as a result of multiple major disasters, including at the Wellington, Haig and William pits. These terrible incidents are remembered to this day by members of the Pit Crack West Cumbria group, which organises annual remembrance events and creates a community for retired miners. Let me put on record my thanks to Dave Craddock, Joseph Ritson and others who are involved in the group. I also pay tribute to Patrick Robertson and others who are working to keep the memory of Workington's mining heritage alive with their campaign for a mining memorial in Workington, which I wholeheartedly support.

Despite those tragedies, west Cumbria remembers our mining history proudly. Having witnessed the loss not just of our mining industry but, over time, the generation of new nuclear power—despite being the site of the world's first civil nuclear power station—that loss is felt profoundly. When not replaced, that loss does something to the psychology of a community. People yearn for work that provides a sense of shared purpose.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): The hon. Member is being generous with his time. He speaks passionately about coalmining in Cumbria and Whitehaven. He will be aware that there is a chance in Whitehaven to open a metallurgical coking mine, which would produce coke for steel and cement in this country. Will he have a word with his own Government to persuade them to open the coalmine?

Josh MacAlister: The hon. Member's intervention was perfectly timed, because I was about to say that it is in these communities that the easy soundbites of populists can take hold. I will answer his question in time.

Our response must be economic revival in coalfield communities that can generate a renewed sense of purpose and pride. The cynical promise of the last Government to my constituents was that they would reopen a coalmine that they knew would likely never come. They told my community that the best it could hope for was jobs in a dying industry—jobs that would be tied to exporting a volatile commodity that lacked a domestic market. My job, and the Government's job, is to put other options on the table. I have produced an industrial plan for west Cumbria, and since the election I have commissioned and updated a more detailed version of the plan, which I will publish shortly. It sets out how we might secure new nuclear, upgrade the port of Workington, and fuel new advanced manufacturing and industrial jobs in the area. The plan would revive and diversify west Cumbria's economy and boost our sense of pride—looking to the future, not the past, for the answers that my community deserves.

Those plans stand a chance of success only because we have a Government who are committed to an industrial strategy; who are serious about new nuclear power generation, as announcements earlier today indicate; and who recognise the vital role of upgrading our ports, and have set the national wealth fund on a footing to support those initiatives. The Government's growth mission, actively backing those kinds of plans, offers an answer to revive our coalfield communities. I look forward to continuing to work with the Government to deliver this change for my community, and invite the Minister to west Cumbria to talk not only about these plans but the opportunity that the recently announced devolution deal might offer to revive the prospect of jobs and economic opportunity in my community.

2.21 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) for securing this incredibly important debate. He is a true champion for miners across our country. My constituency of North West Leicestershire has a rich mining heritage, with most of the Leicestershire pits falling in my constituency. It fills me with great pride to stand in the Chamber, giving a voice to our coalfield communities. When I look to the colleagues who are present, I am reminded of not just how significant an impact the coalmining industry had, but how much that history unites us.

For my constituency, the legacy of the coalmining industry is literally written on the map, in the name of our main urban centre, Coalville. One of the first events that I attended as a candidate was the 125-year anniversary of the 1898 Whitwick colliery mining disaster. The ceremony unveiled a memorial to the 35 miners—men and boys—who lost their lives in that disaster. I pay tribute to them in this House today: William Bradshaw, Josiah Brookes, John Davies, William Greasley, William Moon, William Percival, Lewis Smith, John Tugby, Joseph Wilson, James Wright, Henry Wyatt, James Wyatt, William Belcher, Charles Clamp, William Davies, John Elliott, Thomas Greasley, Joseph King, William Limb, John Platts, Joseph Shaw, John Skellington, James Evans, John Richards, William Bostock, John Moore, Patrick O'Mara, Thomas Timson, Thomas Beniston, Edward Edwards, Benjamin Wileman, Henry Springthorpe, Samuel Stacey, William Stacey and John Albert Gee, who was just 13 years old, and lost his life after running back into the pit to warn others of the danger.

The Whitwick historical group has been unwavering in its dedication to ensure that the disaster is not forgotten. I pay tribute to the following members of the group for their tireless work: John Ivor West Colledge, Alan Michael Wileman and the late Lesley Hale. To support our coalmining communities, we need to preserve the history of those who powered our country. While we must support our communities to protect our industrial heritage, we have to provide a great path to the future. Most of North West Leicestershire bears the hallmarks of coalmining, with pit wheels dotted far and wide throughout the constituency. Snibston has one of the last remaining examples of above-ground operational workings of a pit.

Just outside my constituency is the open-cast mine on the edge of Measham, which closed in 2016. The mine was granted permission on the condition that contributions went to the Ashby canal and a community fund. Tapping into that money created by the mine will help to develop my coalfield town across my constituency and boost economic support. The national forest has also been a key driver for transitioning the industrial landscape to beautiful countryside. It is a fact, however, that our community is poorly served by public transport, and seemingly the best way to support my coalfield community is to preserve and restore the Stephenson-built railway line locally known as Ivanhoe. Opening up the railway line will be key to ensuring greater access to jobs and education for our future.

I was incredibly pleased that, as has been mentioned, the autumn Budget overturned the injustice on the mineworkers pension scheme. In my constituency alone, that has delivered justice for more than 1,500 families, giving them an extra £29 a week. Our attention must now be on delivering the same justice for members of the BCSSS. That would make a huge difference to my community; almost 800 people would benefit from it. No miner, widow or coalfield family should feel excluded from the pension money that was earmarked for them. I know how strong the coalmining community is in my constituency, and protecting our coalmining communities will be key to future prosperity.

2.25 pm

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) for securing this valuable debate. I am here to speak on behalf of 750 of my constituents. There is a sense of injustice, confusion and fear. These are the people who were ignored and missed out when the Chancellor announced last October that mineworkers who had paid into the mineworkers pension scheme will be paid out after years of campaigning, and receive their share of the reserves that have built up over decades.

In particular, I will talk about two Bassetlaw residents: Michael Houghton, who worked for over 20 years on the frontline as a qualified mechanical engineer, responsible for hundreds of staff and millions of pounds-worth of plant and machinery, and Tony Gibson, whose grandfather and father worked in the Durham coalfield, and who began his mining career at Bevercotes, Nottinghamshire in 1975, winning an award for the best final-year apprentice in the Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire areas while still working on the coalface. At the age of 23, the youngest permissible age allowed by law, he was promoted to the staff and became a deputy, a move that took him from

[Jo White]

the MPS into the BCSSS. He is 66 in three months' time, and will be at the lower end of the BCSSS pension age. He has suffered from two cancers: bowel and prostate. Both his knees have been replaced due to working on the coalface.

Both men transferred from the MPS to the BCSSS as they progressed through their mining careers. This happened to many people unknowingly. The sense of anger and injustice is palpable. They feel ignored and forgotten, their years of hard work and service devalued. My commitment to Michael and Tony, and to the 748 who stand alongside them, is that I will do everything that I can to right the even greater injustice that they were forgotten—overlooked, while 86,000 retired miners now receive their full pension entitlement. It has impacted on the managerial staff and overmen who worked at the pit, alongside the women who worked in the canteen and in the office, and of course their widows and widowers. When I met local BCSSS members, I heard their greatest fear: the ticking clock of time. As each day goes by, members pass on and their personal fight for justice goes with them. I ask the Government to recognise the sense of urgency and act now to right this unhappy wrong.

2.28 pm

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) for securing this important debate. My constituency of North Durham has a proud mining heritage. In almost every village and town there are pit wheels or miner's tub monuments. Many community halls and schools proudly house Durham Miners' Association and National Union of Mineworkers banners, and hundreds of my constituents proudly attend the Durham miners' gala every year, but alongside the celebration and pride, there is loss and tragedy, with monuments to commemorate tragic incidents in which many lives were lost in the service of mining.

The most awful of those incidents in my constituency was the West Stanley pit disaster. Sunday 16 February marks the 116th anniversary of the 1909 West Stanley pit disaster, which took the lives of 168 men and boys, and was one of the worst coalmining disasters in British history. The disaster continues to have profound importance in the local community's collective memory. The headteacher at North Durham academy talked about families who go to look at the names of their ancestors on the monument. I pay tribute to the resilience, courage and spirit shown by the community of Stanley.

Hon. Members have spoken about the mineworkers pension scheme in detail. I am delighted that 630 former miners in North Durham are receiving an uplift to their weekly pension, and fairer payments for years to come. I welcome the fact that the Government are reviewing the BCSSS, but the investment reserve must be transferred to its members as soon as possible. That is now a political decision; changes to the scheme's rules can be made only by the Government. I hope that the Minister can say what progress has been made on the review when he winds up the debate.

The decline of the coalmining industry, from its peak in 1913 when 165,000 men and boys worked in Durham's 304 mines, was long and slow. That decline took place over a long period, and so did the economic damage

that came with the closure of the mines. One of the most tragic policies to exacerbate the suffering of the communities in County Durham was the concept of category D villages; was a deliberate decision not to invest in them, and to run them down. Quite a few villages in my constituency were condemned, in public policy terms, in that way, and local people fought for the survival of their communities. My fundamental concern is that even now, so long after the closure of the last mine in Sacriston in my constituency in the 1980s, there has been very little systematic repurposing, economically, in those areas. Levels of poverty and deprivation are still far too high. Some of the economic activity that was intended to replace coalmining has in turn been shut down, such as the Ever Ready factory at Tanfield Lea.

I pay tribute to the CRT for the excellent work it does in communities like mine, supporting jobs and local economic growth. It supports 14 grassroots voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations in North Durham. It has submitted a proposal to the Government for more capital funding to help it expand its vital work over the next five years. I hope the Government will respond positively.

As I said in my maiden speech, there is a need for strategic economic regeneration, and a new economic purpose for regions like mine, and that requires the Government to think about economic growth that is focused on the regions that most need high-quality new jobs. They can do that through investment, infrastructure and procurement decisions, and that needs a joined-up approach across the whole of Government. I hope the Minister will take that into account.

2.32 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) on securing the debate. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for all the hard work he does for our coalfield communities.

My now older children groan whenever I mention the industrial revolution. They grew up hearing about it, because I always thought it was very important for them to understand their place. I could not think of a better place to raise them than the constituency of Leigh and Atherton. Its rich history is rooted in coalmining and textile manufacturing. That is probably one of the reasons why, between the times when I have been elected, I stayed in Leigh and regenerated one of our redbrick giants, Leigh Spinners Mill, to create a space for businesses and enterprises to thrive. If we are talking about regeneration, preserving historical structures is vital. They form part of our identity and help us to maintain a connection with the past.

However, there is no denying the impact of decline and the loss of industry on our towns. Industries have not been replaced, and communities are still grappling with the consequences. Our high streets, once bustling, are now burdened with vacant, decaying buildings with absentee landlords. Our road networks, originally designed around our factories and mills, struggle under the weight of increasing traffic and congestion.

As the chair of the Labour MPs group on local growth funding, I work alongside colleagues from across England, Scotland and Wales, many of whom represent some of the most disadvantaged areas of the country.

We are firmly committed to supporting the Government's plans to reform local growth funding, especially after the failure of the previous Government's policy. The Labour MPs group, in collaboration with the Industrial Communities Alliance, presented an ambition statement, which outlined key proposals for the upcoming spending review. Among the proposals is a call for funding allocation formulas that more accurately reflect the true needs of our communities, and a call for greater devolution of power to local leaders. After all, we have already made significant strides with our Greater Manchester Mayor, Andy Burnham, and the long-awaited bus reforms.

The proposals are relevant not just to former coalfield areas like mine; they speak to all disadvantaged parts of our nation. Funding must be allocated fairly and based on need, not through a competitive bidding process that disproportionately benefits already affluent areas. Local growth funding must have one clear and overarching focus: economic development, regeneration and connectivity. I am under no illusion that a large financial institution will rock up to Leigh and create thousands of jobs—that is not going to happen—so how do we focus on connecting to areas where growth is happening, and how can we better support the businesses that we already have in our towns?

I am fully committed to the Government's growth strategy, and am grateful that we now have a Government who are bold in their ambition to get this country working again. The Government have a unique opportunity to correct past injustices, invest in our future and build prosperous new industrial areas.

2.36 pm

Elaine Stewart (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) on securing this most important debate. First, I need to declare my interests: I am a former communities manager at the Coalfields Regeneration Trust in Scotland, and I am the proud daughter of a miner and a canteen worker who worked in the pits from an early age, Ellen and John Orr.

I am delighted that support for coalfield communities is on the agenda again in this House. Those communities, once thriving hubs of industry, have faced decades of decline and hardship since the rapid closure of mines in the mid-80s. They are the communities that we live in and represent. Despite the resilience and determination of the people in these areas, the lack of meaningful action from previous Governments has left them struggling to rebuild and prosper. Throughout that time, the Coalfields Regeneration Trust has been a beacon of hope. Over the past 25 years, it has invested hundreds of millions of pounds in community projects. However, funding has significantly diminished in recent years in Scotland and across the country. Reviving our former coalfield sites means reinstating the support that the Conservatives took away, and increasing the support that the SNP is cutting yearly.

The Labour Government rightly highlight the importance of the growth agenda. That growth needs to be for everyone, everywhere. I urge the Government to look at the CRT's investment plans. They are about investing to reverse the left-behind legacy in coalfield communities. One challenge is poor health. People living in coalfield communities still die one year earlier than the national average, and three years earlier than they would if they

lived in south-east England. Economic inactivity is also an issue, with 600,000 people in the coalfield areas claiming disability living allowance or personal independence payment. Those figures are significantly higher than the national average. There is a brain drain from coalfield communities; many young people move away to study and never return.

The situation is particularly dire in areas of my constituency. The numbers sadly speak for themselves. In the coalfield communities of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock, there are only 41 jobs per 100 residents of working age, and one in four people claim out-of-work benefits. One in 13 claim the personal independence payment or disability living allowance, and one in three have no qualifications. One in 12 people are in bad or very bad health. However, every week, I see at first hand the positive impact that the Coalfields Regeneration Trust has in my community; for example, it is delivering and developing after-school and breakfast clubs in Drongan to address child poverty and support families. It is also looking to replicate that in a small coalfield village called Dalrymple.

Much more needs to be done, with the support of the UK Government. I will work with colleagues to make the case to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government for increased funding for projects that focus on our community wealth-building model. Unlike previous Governments, we need to leave a lasting and positive legacy for our coalfield communities. We need to end the left-behind legacy once and for all.

2.40 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Mining has long been deeply woven into the practical and cultural fabric of people's lives in Chesterfield, as it has in all mining communities. I need only look out of the window of the Labour club where I base my constituency office to be confronted with the former Derbyshire Miners' Association offices, and the statues of Chesterfield's first two miner MPs. Indeed, until the election of Tony Benn in 1984, every Member of Parliament for Chesterfield in the 20th century had been a former collier.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) spoke about the educational role of the National Union of Mineworkers. That is one of the many legacies that have been lost as coalmining has disappeared. The union had a real commitment to making sure that its members were educated to the highest standards.

Evidence of mining in Chesterfield and Derbyshire ranges from tragic memorials to miners lost in our various tragedies to the dwindling number of miners' welfare clubs and former offices on Saltergate. They serve as a reminder of the past—a window into a time when the region was dominated by the pits and the opportunities that they provided. It is important, however, that this debate also focuses on the future for coalmining areas, and on investments, such as the investment in junction 29A secured by my former colleague Dennis Skinner. It means that more people are now employed on the old Markham pit site than ever worked underground there.

This timely debate reminds us that the former coalfield areas, cruelly put out of use by the industrial vandalism of the Thatcher Government, have never been satisfactorily repurposed in any strategic way by subsequent Governments. The Coalfields Regeneration Trust recently reflected on

[Mr Toby Perkins]

the impact on health, not just for those with an industrial legacy, but for the one in five people in my constituency who are out of work due to long-term sickness. The same proportion have no formal qualifications. Those statistics paint a picture of what can happen when industry retreats from an area and no plan is made for what happens next.

I have heard former Conservative MPs talking about a benefits culture, but who created that? It was, of course, the Thatcher Government, putting all those miners out of work and expecting them to go on to incapacity benefit. The coalfields are fighting back, however. I pay tribute to John Burrows, the former Derbyshire NUM president and leader of Chesterfield borough council for six years, and his successor, Tricia Gilby. They were successful in attracting £25 million in town deal funds from the previous Government, and the dedication and success of the Staveley town deal board, of which I have been a proud member for the last five years, has brought about welcome investment that will support Staveley to support itself through the regeneration that we need.

However, I agree with colleagues that what we need is not occasional little pots of money, but a long-term strategic plan for re-energising coalfield communities. They are very different from cities, which Governments tend to find it easier to get investment into. We desperately need the new Government's industrial strategy to speak to the needs of constituents like mine, and to set out a thought-through plan for coalfield communities.

I see a real opportunity for coalfields to be at the vanguard of the green revolution. The Government's "clean power by '30" mission alone will unlock £40 billion of investment a year and create thousands of skilled jobs. The coalfields have kept the lights on in this country over the last century, and there is so much opportunity for them to be at the forefront of doing that again. The people of Chesterfield have a proud history of working hard to keep the lights on, and they can keep that noble tradition going.

2.44 pm

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) for arranging this debate. We share an office so I know how important this issue is to him and how frequently he speaks about the need for regeneration in coalfield communities—that is, when he is not arguing with my staff about how old he looks. [Laughter.]

Newdigate, Keresley, Baddesley, Birch Coppice and Daw Mill collieries provided jobs for many in my community until they closed. I am proud to have grown up and lived in a coalfield community that retains many reminders of its mining history. For many years I played tennis at the Grove in Atherstone, which was a former miners' welfare club. I have also walked through the Miners' Welfare Park in Bedworth and taken part in the weekly parkrun.

My grandfather was a miner and like many other mineworkers in the constituency, he lived in Dordon, which started off as just a row of houses until Birch Coppice pit opened. Coal mines brought opportunity to countless people, and many of my constituents worked hard underground in dangerous conditions throughout

their lives. It was therefore crucial they got the pension they were entitled to. Dealing with the injustice of the mineworkers' pension scheme means that 1,043 former mineworkers in my constituency now have the pensions they deserve. We must do the same for those members of the BCSSS, such as the 93-year-old former miner who called my office today.

Like many other coalfield communities, my constituency is still suffering from deprivation that was intensified by the mines closing. The "State of the Coalfields" report reveals that there are substantially fewer jobs in former coalfields than in most other parts of the country. Unfortunately, that is true in my constituency too, with only 63 jobs per 100 residents of working age. The problems that causes cannot be overstated. One in 16 people are in bad or very bad health, one in five are economically inactive due to long-term sickness and one in four have no qualifications.

By working with local businesses and schools, I am determined to break that cycle and to ensure that people in my area have local employment opportunities and leave school with qualifications that allow them to take up those opportunities. Otherwise, my constituency will continue to follow the same pattern that many other coalfield communities face, where people must leave the constituency for work and our towns and high streets suffer as a result. I am therefore here today to urge the Government to take further action to tackle the disadvantages and worklessness faced by coalfield communities, and to ensure that we hold ourselves to our promise to deliver the opportunities that our young people desperately need.

2.47 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) for securing this debate and my many hon. Friends for their outstanding contributions this afternoon.

Clackmannanshire has a proud mining heritage and, like so many other places around the UK, the pit was at the very heart of many local communities. It was somewhere that was more than a workplace; it was a generational employer where comradeship and trust were the things that brave workers, who went underground and put themselves in danger to keep the country warm and moving, relied on. I am proud that the Government announced that the entirety of the mineworkers' pension scheme would be handed over to ex-coalminers and their families—hundreds of my constituents will benefit—and the positive noises coming from Ministers about the BCSSS are welcome.

Clackmannanshire is like other heartlands that have been deindustrialised; the economic and social consequences of industry closing 40-odd years ago are still being felt today. Our young people face the challenge of finding local employment of the kind that will pay a wage that will allow them to contribute to the economy, to participate in society, and one day, perhaps, to buy a house and raise a family in comfort. Naturally, that being the case, there has been an exodus of young people, meaning that talent and potential leave local communities.

My inbox tells the tale of the social devastation that is commonplace in deindustrialised areas. Addiction issues, health problems, inadequate transport links, high suicide rates and people relying on emergency food

parcels just to survive all point to Government failure to tackle deindustrialisation and the inequalities that it produces. If the 1980s and 1990s were the decades in which industry and manufacturing left communities like mine, the 2010s were the period when austerity ruled. Austerity was an assault on the poorest, the most disadvantaged and the most vulnerable in our society. Now we see reductions in opportunity, negative social mobility, low-wage employment, the gig economy, communities across the country ravaged as leisure centres close, and an unrelenting attack on the public services that are the very fabric of our communities. Then, of course, we had a pandemic whose true death toll can never be accurately calculated. Inequality has become even worse because of covid, and inequality is a very real killer.

Yesterday my constituency was yet again the victim of industry leaving, when the workers at the Grangemouth refinery were served their redundancy notices. On site, more than 400 highly skilled workers will lose their jobs, and when we factor in the wider supply chain, there will be nearly 3,000 job losses. Like the coal industry, a vital energy creator will be lost forever. A different decade, a different Government; nevertheless, strikingly similar social consequences will be the result.

Let me finish on a more positive note. With a capital investment of £50 million over five years, the Government have the chance to give the Coalfields Regeneration Trust an opportunity to help to partly reindustrialise coalfields communities that would create thousands of jobs. Our communities need to be invested in, not forgotten and consigned to history as somewhere that used to have industry. Our communities deserve an awful lot more than that.

2.51 pm

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): Last weekend when I was out door-knocking in Eckington, one gentleman told me of his frustration with politics and his disbelief that it would ever achieve anything for him. I have to admit that I am sometimes frustrated by this attitude, because I do not believe that the answer is never to try, but I was none the less mulling over exactly why he had given up so much.

Also last weekend, I went to an exhibition and talk organised by women to show what they had done to support the miners. Like many members of my generation who grew up after the strikes, I was aware of them but, as with so much working-class history, we were never taught about them at school. It was therefore a huge privilege to hear Janet and Kate give such a fascinating talk about the huge role that they had played, and about the sheer strength of the mining community who had fought so hard to support each other during this period. How little they had, but how much they shared!

It is clear that the roots of my constituent's apathy do not lie just in the past 14 years of Conservative-imposed national decline, but go all the way back to the miners' strikes, when the British Government said, "We will take your jobs away and there is nothing you can do about it. Get on your bike, we are not interested, you are on your own." If the Government in Westminster did that to you, why would you ever look at them again? The fact is that the closure of the mines did not just remove employment, but showed huge contempt for areas such as North East Derbyshire, and ripped the heart out of the social cohesion of communities. We in

Labour knew when we came in that we had to deliver for those communities. One of their biggest champions was the late John Prescott, and I applaud his work in establishing the Coalfield Task Force and then the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, which has been doing excellent work ever since.

However, despite the general rise in living standards that we delivered, along with an improvement in the NHS and a huge push for aspiration, we could not close the gap between our coalfield communities and other places, and what work we did achieve was rapidly slashed by the coalition Government and many Tory Governments after that. Let me just say, as an aside, how disappointing it is, when I see so many of my Labour colleagues in the Chamber, to note how few representatives of the Conservative party are present—and how few representatives of smaller parties such as Reform, who profess to care.

My message to my constituent in Eckington, and to everyone else, is that I am not going to give up fighting for them and for the step change in opportunity that is so desperately needed in North East Derbyshire, and I know that I have hundreds of colleagues in the Labour party with me in that fight. In communities like mine, we do not need charity; we just need the tools to build our own future, and then we will just get on and do it. We need infrastructure so that we can access jobs, customers, markets and education. That is why I am campaigning for the Staveley bypass to better connect Staveley, Barrow Hill and Mastin Moor. That is why I am campaigning for more buses and better buses, so that so people in Killamarsh can get to work on time when work starts at 8 am—remarkably, the first bus is too late for that. That is why I am campaigning to make better use of our existing rail links, so that Dronfield, a town of 20,000, does not just have one train an hour to Sheffield. It is a 10-minute train ride, and we have one train an hour—it is ridiculous. That is why I am campaigning to explore bringing light rail back to communities across North East Derbyshire, to connect us from Clay Cross and Killamarsh to places such as Chesterfield and Sheffield.

It is about the social infrastructure that we have lost as well. We need youth facilities, to show early on that our Government care about young people. We need support for our high streets, so that they can be the heart of our communities. We need to crack down on petty crime and antisocial behaviour, so that we can feel safe. We need our rural roads to be safer, so that we do not see families devastated by loss.

Underlying this is the vital work that the Government have already started on fixing our NHS, improving our schools and growing our economy. For my constituents in North East Derbyshire, I am fighting for our Government to give them the tools they need, and we will put in the hard work together to build a better future. We have done it before, and I know we will do it again.

2.55 pm

Michael Wheeler (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab): I was very pleased to support the application from my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jodge) to secure today's debate, and I congratulate him on doing so.

My constituency is home to the proud former coalfield communities of Astley and Mosley Common, which I share with my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt), with other many

[Michael Wheeler]

parts of my constituency also historically linked to the mining industry. For generations, the Astley Green and Mosley Common collieries were cornerstones of the local area, providing thousands of jobs, economic stability and a focal point for the community. The local mineworkers were quite rightly respected for the tough, dangerous and essential work they did day after day down the pit.

I pay tribute to the great work carried out by the volunteers who run the Lancashire Mining Museum in my constituency, which I have had the pleasure of visiting on a number of occasions. Occupying the old Astley Green colliery site, the museum illustrates just how central the mining legacy is to the area's identity. We must ensure that the sacrifices made by mineworkers and their communities to power this country are never forgotten.

The collieries in my constituency were closed more than 50 years ago. However, the impact on the local area lingers today. Former coalfield communities still suffer from a shortage of good-quality jobs, higher levels of deprivation and worse health outcomes. The "State of the Coalfields 2024" report showed that on average, hourly earnings in the former coalfields are still 6% to 7% below the GB average, and it found that the overall out-of-work claimant rate was 7 percentage points above that of south-east England. It is clear that the coalfields face a shared set of structural issues and challenges.

After 14 years of undelivered promises on regional inequality from the party opposite—although there are not many of them opposite us at the moment—our coalfield communities will now finally benefit from a Government who genuinely want to level them up. Legislation such as the Employment Rights Bill will positively impact our former coalfields, making work pay by delivering the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation. I welcome the Government's decision in the autumn Budget regarding the mineworkers pension scheme—a long-overdue decision that will see retired miners finally get the money they deserve. However, more can and should be done. The reinstatement of Government funds to the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, in support of their community wealth-building model, would provide much-needed stimulus to promote local growth, feeding into this Labour Government's mission to secure growth and deliver rising living standards for working people.

To support our coalfield communities in the future, we must ensure we do not forget their shared past. There are many lessons to be learned from their experiences, particularly as we build the green industries of the future. Never again should communities be neglected and abandoned by the Government as they were in the 1980s. Adapting industries to the future can take many forms. My constituency is home to the iconic Eccles protector lamp. Despite no longer having mines, protector lamps are still produced in my constituency and, repurposed, for more than 25 years they have carried the Olympic flame—traditional skills, repurposed and put to continuing work.

The scars left by pit closures have never fully been addressed. Their damaging legacy continues to reverberate to this day. The need for new and continued support from our Government is clear. That is the least our proud coalfield towns deserve.

2.59 pm

Jodie Gosling (Nuneaton) (Lab): I declare my interest as a voluntary director of a nursery that is run from a venue supported by the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. It is a good example of the wider impact of investment in our coalfields. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jodge) for securing this important debate, and for all his hard work to drive this issue forward.

Nuneaton's first shafts were sunk in the 1850s, and the last pit, Daw Mill, closed in 2016 after 160 years of service—of men going into the darkness to keep the lights of the nation on and the army of people working around them to support them and the industry. I know that they are delighted by this new Government's rapid progress on resolving the disputes over the mineworkers pension scheme, and very much look forward to similar progress and updates from the Minister on the British Coal staff superannuation scheme.

I am proud to live in a coal village. It is a strong and vibrant community, and my constituents' understanding of the sacrifice made by so many is embedded in our towns' collective history and consciousness. The pit closures left a vacuum and a legacy of social, economic and health challenges which to this day have an incredible, indelible impact on my constituency.

The people of Nuneaton earn around £100 a week less than our neighbours and the national average. People in Nuneaton die younger and live less healthy lives, and children in Nuneaton leave school less qualified. Data from the Office for National Statistics shows similar trends to those mentioned by other colleagues: our young people choose to leave Nuneaton, and the devastating impacts of poverty are still felt by far too many families and children. These challenges are compounded by complex historical infrastructure decline. It has taken years of fighting to ensure that Daw Mill's restoration order will be delivered.

Issues such as shared sewers and drains, land contamination and unadopted roads mar our beautiful villages and estates, eroding pride and leaving us feeling forgotten and unloved. Pat from New Arley has been almost housebound for years. She has to be carried on to the pavement because the unadopted service roads—the Arley backs—by her door are in such a poor state that it is dangerous for her to use her wheelchair and scooter. She has difficulty attending hospital appointments or seeing friends. These issues have been present for years, and sticking-plaster investment and quick wins will not solve them. Rectifying the widespread disrepair is no quick fix.

These abandoned service roads invite antisocial behaviour, drugs and theft. They are relics of a forgotten time when we had weekly coal deliveries, and they cause many issues and lengthy delays for our utilities. Fixing water leaks, overhead cables and supplies takes much longer than it should because of complexity; it can take days just to identify who is responsible for the land and to gain access. More support is needed to rebuild complex capital programmes and to work with highways authorities to adopt and maintain these areas, to prevent them from becoming forgotten wastelands. Yet new estates with similar issues and unadopted roads continue to be built.

We appreciate the investment we have seen from the Coalfields Regeneration Trust in Nuneaton, which has supported projects like the one to tackle long-term

health issues by installing community cardiac facilities in Camp Hill. The power of our community and the ability to thrive in our coalfield communities is dependent on support nationally.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

3.3 pm

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I am proud to represent several former coalmining communities. Abercraf, Cwmtwrch, Gwaun-Cae-Gurwen, Ystradgynlais, Pontardawe and Rhos are just a few of the proud former mining communities that I represent. I therefore thank the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) for securing this debate.

Across Wales, nearly 800,000 people—about a third of the population—live in former coalmining towns and villages, and I am very proud to come from a Welsh mining family. I will never forget my grandfather taking me to see his father's grave in Maesteg cemetery. His father died aged 34 after working up to his waist in ice-cold water for several hours. The men and women of our coalfield communities made huge sacrifices to power this country, so it is right that we are discussing the future of their communities today.

To cut a long story short, Welsh mining communities have been left behind by successive Governments. Margaret Thatcher's policies—the closure of our major industry in Wales and the failure to replace it with anything else—have left lasting scars. It is not hard to see why people in south Wales wonder whether their Governments are listening to them. This Parliament is an open goal for the Government to repair the damage done by Thatcherism. The Conservative party squandered many of its 13 years in power, carrying on with a London-centric banker-friendly form of growth that means younger generations have to leave for the cities, as my mum did 30 years ago. This Government must not repeat the mistake.

Across the former south Wales coalfields, the economic reality is dire. Wages are lower than the national average, job growth is sluggish and unemployment remains high. In fact, in the south Wales coalfields, there are just 46 jobs for every 100 working-age people. Nearly 800,000 people—a third of the entire population of Wales—live in those areas, which is why they are so important to the Welsh economy. Wales is £10,000 a head poorer than England, and fixing our former coalmining communities is key to fixing the Welsh economy. Coalfield communities deserve to be at the forefront of economic renewal. People in coalfield communities want the Government to show them that they matter. They are desperate for change.

With a splintering geopolitical order, we need a strong manufacturing base to keep ourselves safe, and there are many excellent manufacturing companies in my constituency. Recently, those from one such company that makes vintage motorcycle parts came to see me. They are currently having big problems exporting those parts to Europe, which is directly affecting the business and employment in my constituency. That is why it is so important that the Government do everything they can to repair our trading relationships with the European Union.

I am concerned that after years of failed promises from the Conservative Government to level up, the very idea of levelling up seems absent from Labour's plans.

Just last week, the Chancellor announced infrastructure projects in the south-east of England, while the Swansea valley, which I represent, has been left off the map for the south Wales metro project. It will be almost the only valley in south Wales not to have a trainline. The people of the Swansea valley deserve to have a railway line again too. It is time we invest properly in these communities and give them the opportunity to thrive once again.

I know from first-hand experience that communities in the coalfields are resilient and industrious. There are unique opportunities opening up to bring back jobs to our area. Let us take the Global Centre for Rail Excellence in Onllwyn, which straddles my constituency. That technology testing facility, located on the site of a former coalmine, could bring new jobs and manufacturing back to the Swansea valley, but it needs the Government, energy and money behind it. Public services, especially healthcare, also need urgent attention. The health impacts of mining have left a lasting legacy. We must ensure that these communities receive the care they need as we work toward a more sustainable future.

While the economic issues facing these communities are vast, many local residents also live with a distinct fear. In Wales and across the UK, the Aberfan tragedy of 1966 is seared into the collective memory of our nation, yet for many communities across south Wales the risk remains. Coal tips across the UK are still in need of remediation. The reality is that the risk of tip collapses is increasing due to climate change and more frequent, intense rainfall. In my own constituency, Godre'rgrraig primary school near Pontardawe was forced to close in 2019 due to fears of a landslide. The children are still being taught in temporary cabins in a car park, which is completely unacceptable.

Many communities in my constituency feel similarly abandoned. In Gwaun Cae Gurwen, residents of Twynrefail place have been fighting for years for Neath Port Talbot council to adopt their road, but that has not happened. The road is in such a bad condition that the residents are concerned that they will barely reach their own front doors. Although I was glad that Labour allocated £25 million in funding during the autumn Budget to help remediate coal tips in Wales, it is a far cry from the over £600 million that the Welsh Government have said will be needed to make these tips safe for future generations.

Finally, I wish to turn to the issue of miners' pensions. The British Coal staff superannuation scheme currently has more than 45,000 members across the UK, as many Members have already mentioned, including 4,000 in Wales and 146 in my constituency. Unlike their former colleagues in the mineworkers pension scheme, members of the BCSSS did not have their pensions unfrozen by the Government in the Budget. For many of these former miners, time is running out. Six miners in the BCSSS die every day due to health complications related to mining. Many fear that they will not live to see a resolution to this injustice. That is why the Government must act quickly; time is not with the miners or their families. Will the Minister confirm today when the Government will give these miners and their families the pensions that they worked for?

If the UK Government want to address inequality and prompt economic recovery across south Wales, they must start by investing in coalfield communities. Families such as mine have suffered the consequences of communities being left behind. We cannot afford to let

[David Chadwick]

this continue for future generations. Our communities in south Wales are strong, resilient and ready to succeed—they just need the opportunity to do so.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

3.11 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) on securing this debate. The House will know that Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner is not a coalfields constituency. Our mining tradition is far older. It goes back to the days of chalk. Its legacy today is seen in the impact of sinkholes in the local area.

Today's debate is very much focused on the lasting legacy and impact of an era when coal was king. Although I do not represent a coalfields constituency, I certainly grew up in one. The old men with the blue scars and the hacking coughs from emphysema—or pneumoconiosis, as we now know it to be—were the background to my childhood. I feel lucky that I had a great-grandfather who, unlike many miners, lived a very long life. He started working in a pit at Cwmcarn at the age of 12 and carried on to the age of 70. He shared the impact of things such as the Universal Colliery disaster in Senghenydd on his life and the community in which he lived and grew up, and of seeing his brother die after being buried in a rockfall.

Although the industry created the enormous economic opportunities that have been described by many Members, we know that the environment was very harsh and difficult, and as we recognise in our many debates about climate change and the transition to net zero, it created a product that, although valuable and effective at generating energy, is enormously polluting.

Mr Perkins: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for giving way. We have just had a very good debate, but it must be a considerable embarrassment to him that not a single Member of His Majesty's Opposition thought that it was worthwhile attending to make a substantive speech. I appreciate that he is not a coalfield MP, and I appreciate that not many Conservative Members are, but does he not think that, if the Conservatives are serious about being ready to represent the whole country again, we should be hearing from some of their MPs in a debate such as this?

David Simmonds: As we see in all the debates that we have in this House, Members will attend to represent the interests of their communities and constituencies. I know that the same point has been made in the past about the lack of Members of Parliament from certain parties attending debates on farming and things such as that. We need to recognise that the central focus of this debate is on the historical impact and the way that we deal with that legacy. As the hon. Gentleman has highlighted, there are, to my regret, not many Conservative Members of Parliament who are dealing with those issues in their constituencies. That is a political fact. However, we will see them very active on issues that directly impact their constituencies on a daily basis.

Adam Jogee: I gently say to the shadow Minister that any party that seeks to lead our United Kingdom should be interested in, and committed to, issues that affect people across the UK. Irrespective of whether Members have particular challenges in their constituencies, more of the shadow Minister's colleagues should have been here.

David Simmonds: I am sure the Government will wish to press that point.

In summing up, it is important, first, to recognise the impact that the end of the use of coal in British industry and energy generation has had; and secondly, to draw out of that history some lessons for what is often termed the just transition—the intended end of oil and gas as a significant player in our energy industries of the future. When I was growing up, the Thatcher Government's engagement on investment was largely with the European Economic Community. I saw the roads being built and the blue flags appearing all over as the Government sought to bring in infrastructure investment to open up places like Cwmcarn—a valley off a valley, which is a challenge to access—and communities of coal board houses, where my sister and her husband still live to this day, so that people could access the growing industries and employment opportunities of the future. The Government at that time recognised that the infrastructure to create that access would be vital.

Grahame Morris: I must take issue with that. I served a number of years on Easington district council, and we were twinned with a similar mining area in North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany. When the Carl Alexander mine near Baesweiler closed, the local authority and the miners were given two years' notice, grants were made available through the federal, local and national Government to retain the miners, and new industrial estates were built. It is interesting to compare that with what happened when our pits closed in Easington, Murton, South Hetton, Horden and Blackhall—we found out on the Friday that the pit was closing on the Monday, and thousands of men lost their jobs.

David Simmonds: I remember those debates, of course, as the backdrop to my experiences growing up, along with the miners' strike and the various interventions that occurred. There is an opportunity—I will put it this way—to learn lessons from that and ensure that the new Government's approach and future Governments' approaches take those into account and handle those situations better.

Luke Akehurst: If we could move forward from the events of the 1980s, in the last Parliament, the Conservative Benches were full of Members representing former mining constituencies, including three of the constituencies in County Durham. Perhaps the reason those Members were not returned at the last general election was that Government's sorry failure to deliver the levelling up they promised. Can the shadow Minister in any way defend the failure to economically regenerate mining areas that in 2019 had Conservative MPs for the first time?

David Simmonds: I am sure that all those former Members of Parliament, and, indeed, some of their Labour predecessors, would also be happy to answer for the work they did, some of which was successful and some of which was not, to bring new jobs, opportunities

and educational chances to those communities. There are many things we can debate that have brought benefits to those communities. If we examine the statistics in the Library briefing on the impact and legacy in different coalfields around the UK, we see quite a different picture. There are some places where those interventions—based on the statistics—appear to have been effective because there are few, if any, super output areas listed that remain affected by those issues of poverty and ill health today, and there are other areas that have struggled to move on. We all know and understand why that is in some places. If the economy of an area has long been based on mining and natural resource, and there is no other direct employment opportunity there, something different needs to be found, and many Members have referred to the impact of that. I have touched on infrastructure as one element.

Rachel Taylor: Will the hon. Member give way?

David Simmonds: I will, with your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Rachel Taylor: An observation I have made as I have listened to the hon. Gentleman is that not one single Member of his party stood up for the thousands of pensioners who were not given the justice they deserve in the mineworkers pension scheme or the BCSSS. His party claims to stand up for pensioners, and yet it did nothing and said nothing for those mining pensioners who deserved a better deal.

David Simmonds: If the hon. Lady refers to *Hansard* for debates on these matters in previous Parliaments, she will find those points being raised by Members from across the House—rightly so—with a view to moving the debate on to the decisions that have been made today.

The Clapham review of the effectiveness of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust was a key opportunity to consider the role that local government in particular plays in the regeneration of our coalfields. Clearly, that challenge exists at a number of levels. The hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) referenced the large number of spoil heaps—some of which I can see from the garden of my parents' house. A number of local authorities—and Governments, through local authorities—have sought to address that through planting and remediation to stabilise their spoil tips, for example, but there is still a job to do. As the years go by and the industries that produce those spoil tips become historical, we know that we must effectively address the risks that they continue to pose.

To conclude my remarks, I turn to the importance of learning from the work that the Coalfields Regeneration Trust undertook and from the points that many Members of all parties have made in debates about these issues over many years. We know that we are about to embark on a process. The UK has made progress in the decarbonisation of our economy since the early 1990s, when, as a leading nation, we began the major shift away from coal. In the 1950s, coal produced most of our energy; today, it contributes to none—our last coal-fired power station recently closed.

The Trades Union Congress recently passed a motion highlighting that 30,000 jobs were at risk in the oil and gas industry. We talk about the just transition—Labour Members are, in my view, justified in raising the problems that process has created—but we must lay the groundwork

for it. I remember interventions during the miners' strike, such as the distribution at my school of the EEC butter mountain. That is not an example of an effective economic intervention to address the needs of people in difficulty. If we are to have a just transition away from fossil fuels in the future, we must learn from the past mistakes of all Governments in respect of coalfields, and incorporate the lessons into effective policy for a better future for all affected communities.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Minister.

3.22 pm

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): I thank all Members for a really thoughtful debate. When Members speak about their constituencies in the way they have today, we get a sense of the pride of place. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) on securing the debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to it. The level of interest in the debate, and the fact that two time limits on speeches have been introduced, speaks volumes.

I know from my own experience of growing up in and representing a constituency with a fierce and proud industrial past, built on the back of the coal that fired it, just how much pride and sense of belonging comes with that. They were jobs—of course they were—but they were more than that; they were about people and place. That identity has stayed with the generations that have come since.

Between 1985 and 1997, the closure of 150 collieries resulted in approximately 250,000 job losses. That was not just about employment; those closures meant the loss of the vital social facilities that the National Coal Board and the trade unions had provided for those communities. That is why the Government are taking concrete action to support coalfield communities and secure the future prosperity of former mining communities while honouring their remarkable heritage.

We really got a sense of that in the debate. My hon. Friends the Members for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery), for Ossett and Denby Dale (Jade Botterill) and for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) spoke about community and solidarity, as well as about heritage. It is that sense of belonging that we need to respect. Quite often—I hear this strongly when I go around the country—people feel not just that Parliament is a million miles away, but that the next town is a million miles away. The isolation that people often feel economically, socially and politically is profound, and we must do far more to meet that challenge.

This Government's defining mission is growth, and we are determined that our coalfield communities are central to it. That is why we are working in partnership to invest in and empower the nation's coalfields, so that they can kick-start growth in their area and increase living standards for working people. We have already announced planning reforms, devolution, our plans to make work pay, and settlements to fix the foundations of local government. That will also help coalfields to build their future and realise their full potential.

Michael Wheeler: Does the Minister agree that economic growth is only meaningful if it takes everyone in every community with it and people in every town feel the benefits, including the towns that we have talked about today?

Jim McMahon: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. He is sat next to my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt); they are both Greater Manchester MPs, and we are all very proud of Greater Manchester. We all see the red dots on the skyline of Manchattan—as we call it, very proudly—and the booming city centre that is Manchester. However, the truth is that unless the social opportunities are there and people have the confidence and skills to compete in that new market that is emerging, it can feel a million miles away. That is really important, and we do see that.

A lot has been said about the mineworkers pension scheme. We recognise that for too long, our coalfield communities have been an afterthought, which is why this Government have reversed those historic injustices by transferring £1.5 billion to mineworkers pensions. Our manifesto also promised that the truth of Orgreave would come to light. The BCSSS was also mentioned, and I can say that the Minister for trade is taking that issue up with the urgency that Members have called for in this House. It was covered in a lot of detail by my hon. Friends the Members for Bassetlaw (Jo White), for Easington (Grahame Morris), for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth), for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) and for Nuneaton (Jodie Gosling). They all spoke, seriously and rightly, about the urgency that is required to resolve this issue. This Government have heard that message loud and clear, and I know that Ministers in other places are working on that.

Grahame Morris: Will the Minister give way?

Jim McMahon: Very briefly, please.

Grahame Morris: I am grateful for the Minister's reassurance on the BCSSS. Before he moves off the issue of funding for growth, a number of hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) and for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Elaine Stewart), raised the issues of fair funding and the Coalfields Regeneration Trust's model for community wealth building. It is seeking a relatively modest £500 million in capital investment spread over five years, which it believes could create half a million square feet of new industrial space. Is the Minister minded to look at that proposal favourably?

Jim McMahon: We are absolutely committed to ensuring that every part of the country realises its full potential. Let us be clear: everybody in every part of the country has potential, but far too often, that potential is not met by opportunity. We will look at any projects and measures that aim to do what my hon. Friend has described in the coalfields to ensure that potential is met, and I can certainly take up that point and maybe follow up in writing.

The proud history of our coalfield communities must be matched with a proud future. Late last year, we published the English devolution White Paper, and a Bill will follow. That White Paper includes a reformed

vision for the long-term plan for towns, which the autumn Budget confirmed will be retained and reformed as part of our regeneration programme. We are proud that through that plan, coalfield communities from Newark-on-Trent to Wrexham will receive a package of up to £20 million in funding and support. Furthermore, this Government are working with mayors where they are to produce local growth plans across their city regions, which sit alongside local coalfield communities, because we recognise that those are vital to our collective economic future.

That regeneration, and the long-term investment and co-ordination that are needed, were referenced by my hon. Friends the Members for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), for North Durham (Luke Akehurst), for Leigh and Atherton, for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Elaine Stewart), for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor), for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) and for Airdrie and Shotts (Kenneth Stevenson). They recognise that of course, we can be proud of the history of our place—we all are—but the future is important too, and if we do not put the building blocks in place to rebuild industry and pride, we will miss a trick.

As was referenced earlier, no working-class person is waiting for a handout, but we absolutely deserve a hand up. We are sick and tired of being told to wait our turn, to behave and stand in line and to know our place, hoping that somehow, tomorrow, our turn may just come. Lesson after lesson and generation after generation shows that, for all those promises, it never comes. We cannot have power, wealth and opportunity constantly being hoarded by the centre, to the exclusion of our communities that are impacted by it.

That is why devolution is so important. If we do not break away from the centralising model of command and control, and the hoarding of power and opportunity, we will never make progress with our economy, society or political power in this country. This week, we are proud to be expanding the devolution priority programme, through which more mayors will be created, with the powers and the tools that they will need, as local leaders, to do what is right for their area. They will not have to come cap in hand to central Government, in constant, wasteful bidding wars.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones), I pay tribute to the late John Prescott, a working-class voice in politics. He took up that charge—that fight—and we all recognise the work that he did. Members of the House have our assurance that we stand with our coalfield communities and the excellent Members of Parliament who have spoken today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for coalfield communities.

Financial Education

3.30 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered financial education.

I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests; I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on financial education for young people. Many members of that august body are on the Benches today, and it is worth pointing out that it is the second-largest all-party parliamentary group in Parliament, beaten only by that on the communal love for beer. There is a reason why the APPG on financial education is so popular: financial education is a profoundly important topic that affects the lives and life chances of our communities right across the country.

We cannot sugar-coat this: we are in a mess when it comes to financial education and financial literacy in our economy and our society, and we have known that for ages. This is going back a few years, I accept, but one of the reasons why I was first drawn to this topic is that I did not receive any lessons on personal finance at all during the whole of my education. In fact, it is true to say that I have been taught considerably more about the formation of oxbow lakes than about personal finance, debt management, budgeting, saving, compound interest, pensions and individual savings accounts. Those are things that grown-ups worry about, and that have such an impact on their lives, yet they were simply missing from my education.

I am afraid it does not stop there, because I have asked my children—aged 21, 18 and 15—about their financial education, and they have received none at all, so there has been no improvement, yet we know that this matters profoundly. We know that those unfortunate enough to grow up in a financially chaotic household have no education from their parents, do not understand debt, except for seeing the consequence of it, and do not understand budgeting. Prudent financial management then becomes a middle-class secret. If we care about the poor and the most disadvantaged in our society, financial education must be a core part of the curriculum in our schools.

We know that financial stress has a huge impact both on our economy and on our society. Way back in 2014, Barclays bank did research that showed that 17.5 million hours were lost to the economy because of financial stress. We also know that financial stress, or financial worries, is one of the core components of family breakdown and the break-up of relationships, leading to arguments in the home and distress caused to children.

Yet we know what the solution is. We have had loads of research. The Money and Pensions Service has said that attitudes towards money and finances are fundamentally established by the age of just seven. We know that financial education in schools is directly correlated with higher career earnings, reduced personal debt, increased pension savings and increased savings more generally. We have all been elected to this place, and we have all come here, I assume, to improve the lives and life chances of our constituents. The single biggest thing we can do for our constituents in our time in this place is get effective financial education into the core

curriculum. I say that to the Minister, because she needs to reflect on what her ambitions are for her time in this place.

We have had a crack at it. Back in 2014, we, or our predecessors, thought we had done a jolly good job, because financial education was included in the national curriculum in secondary schools in England, and in primary schools in the devolved nations. Last year, on the 10th anniversary of that change, the all-party parliamentary group on financial education for young people undertook research to see what the impact of that inclusion in the national curriculum had been. The awful truth was that it was virtually negligible, because financial education was not in fact being taught. We made the mistake as policymakers of saying, “We’ve changed the policy—job done. That’s the solution”, but we did not take the next step and ensure that the policy was implemented effectively. Indeed, 55% of teachers responsible for implementing the national curriculum were either unaware of the requirement, or unsure whether there was a requirement to teach financial education, and 62% of children had no recollection of having received any.

Why did we think we had solved the problem with policy, when in practice the change did not take place? Part of the answer is that financial education was included within personal, social, health and economic education, and it was not measured by Ofsted, and we all know that we get what we measure. Another part of the answer is that teachers lack confidence, because they too have not received financial education, and they are unsure about their personal finances. Far too often, financial education depends on there being a personal convert among the teaching staff. Some schools do a brilliant job on this issue, but too often that is wholly dependent on there being one member of staff who takes the bit between the teeth.

Just today, Young Enterprise, which operates the secretariat of the all-party group, published a report called “Making the Classroom Count”. It has done research, and has assessed the state of provision and how we can improve it. Its first conclusion concerns the curriculum in both primary and secondary education. This subject is too important to be left to the peripheries of the educational process; it must be recognised as a core element. If financial education is a core part of the curriculum, it must be measured as such by Ofsted. The second issue is accountability; we must inspect for financial education, because we get what we measure.

The third issue is guidance. There must be access to trusted teaching materials for hesitant teachers. Too often, the all-party group heard that teachers were not sure which resources, from the plethora out there, they should trust, and they are naturally hesitant about branded materials coming into schools. We need the Government to take a step forward and build on the work already being done on trusted resources. The fourth point is about awareness; the Government must be clear and express the fact that financial education is a core part of the curriculum. Finally—I put it last because it is the least important—comes money and resources. They are necessary—we need money to achieve things—but if the Government took steps one to four, we would be 95% of the way there.

There is a solution to the money side of things. I understand that the Chancellor is never keen to write a cheque, but we have the dormant assets scheme, and

[Jerome Mayhew]

financial inclusion is a core element of the distribution of dormant assets. We also have the National Lottery Heritage Fund, which has offered to match-fund the element spent on financial inclusion. Surely there is a way that the Government can make best use of that money. The Government are reviewing the national curriculum, so now is the time for them to take a bold step, and not just have the policy, but ensure that it is acted on. Will the Minister include financial education in the primary curriculum? Will she undertake to measure what she wants to see in our schools, and require Ofsted to report on financial education in primary and secondary schools? Will she embed financial education in the curriculum, and not just in PSHE? Will she show some ambition, in the light of the 2029 OECD programme for international student assessment on financial literacy? Will she commit to the Government applying to join that scheme?

Will the Minister develop the good work of the Oak National Academy, which has produced about 42 online lessons to support financial education and literacy? Will she follow that up with a commitment to developing trusted paper resources for the educational sector? Finally, will she consider making proper use of the dormant assets fund and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and directing additional funding from those sources to financial literacy education in our primary and secondary schools?

I started by talking about ambition, and I want to finish on that, too. It is profoundly important for the life chances of our constituents over the next 10, 20, 30 and 40 years that we grasp this issue now. We spend so much time on tittle-tattle in this Chamber, making cheap debating points that may make the headlines in the evening, or tomorrow. I do not care whether this debate is reported, as long as we can get this simple change to our educational processes and deliver for our constituents. Now is the time to do it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I will start with an informal five-minute time limit; Members can help each other.

3.41 pm

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on financial education for young people, for securing this debate. I should first declare not only my interests—I am vice-chair of the APPG, and have been a trustee of Girlguiding Bristol and South Gloucestershire, and of a brilliant local youth work charity, the Foundation for Active Community Engagement—but my deep and long-standing interest in this subject.

Improving financial education for children and adults—our focus is on the former this afternoon—was the policy area among thousands of possible ones that I chose to focus on in my public policy master's degree. Unfortunately, that was not because I thought financial education was going well, and that there could be lessons to apply to other policy areas, but because of how lacking financial education has been, including in my personal experience.

There was a real lack of financial education at school in my otherwise excellent state education. Important information on different types of mortgages and the key differences between secured and unsecured loans should not feel new at the point of major financial commitment and, crucially, at the point of risk.

In January 2020, the TUC reported that total unsecured household debt—that does not include mortgages, and typically has higher interest rates—rose to £407 billion, the highest ever level in the UK, and that was before the pandemic. Despite financial education having been added to the secondary curriculum in England through PSHE in 2014, the Money and Pensions Service found in 2022 that only 38% of young people recalled receiving financial education at school. It is important to be clear that this quest for better financial education is not about placing a higher value on any particular financial choices above others, but everyone should feel capable and confident to make whatever financial decisions are right for them and their circumstances. That is too often not the case.

I believe that a person's background should not determine their life chances and life choices, and the lottery of financial education quality is a huge barrier to making that a reality. The next generation should always do better than the last. If we act to improve financial education, it will help us to make good on that Great British promise for all young people—for those across the Filton and Bradley Stoke constituency, and beyond.

I mentioned financial education in my maiden speech and was grateful in recent months to have the chance to raise it in the House with our Secretary of State for Education. I asked whether the independent, and welcome, curriculum and assessment review would consider foundational life skills such as financial education at all key stages, along with the resources needed to teach them with confidence as part of its work. While none of us in the House can pre-empt the conclusions of that important review, I was glad to hear the Secretary of State's confidence that the review would “carefully consider” what young people need in this area and any support that teachers may need for any reformed curriculum.

Reported teacher confidence is understandably low, as we have already heard this afternoon, in teaching a subject that many of them were not taught either. Again, understandably, research shows that teachers struggle to prioritise subjects that are not assessed and are within PSHE. Indeed, The Money Charity's survey and in-depth interviews with teachers around the country in 2016 found that the prioritisation of assessed subjects was the most commonly identified barrier to delivering financial education, with 80% of teachers citing it. So even when financial education is on the curriculum at secondary level, it does not appear to be there firmly enough.

Teachers give so much and have so much to contend with, and I do not believe that anyone in the House would wish to further overburden them, or indeed the curriculum, by adding more stand-alone subjects. In my view, it is important to consider how financial education can be woven through existing relevant subjects such as maths to ensure that all young people receive the most relevant education to support them to thrive throughout life.

As the daughter of a retired headteacher, I know better than to delve any further into the day-to-day from these Benches, but the evidence suggests that the current approach is not working for anyone. Yet there is

a wider issue, too. The University of Cambridge found that financial habits typically form from around age seven. That strongly suggests that early support is crucial if we are to break down this barrier to opportunity.

It is also worth noting that financial education is on the curriculum at both primary and secondary levels in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It is in England in particular where we are lagging behind, though implementation remains a challenge more widely. While formal education is of course important, there is also a vital role for other organisations, from financial institutions to community organisations. A number are already playing their part, from GoHenry helping young people to save while taking part in money missions to build their long-term financial knowledge and wellbeing to HSBC and Girlguiding working together to help girls and young women build the two things I touched on earlier: capability and confidence. I was thrilled to speak at the launch of its new “I’m money confident” badge, even if I have no longer my own sash to sew it on to.

I will not be able to mention them all, but many more organisations are working in this space, not least Young Enterprise, which provides a diligent and creative secretariat for the all-party parliamentary group. I was also glad to hear recently from Aviva in Stoke Gifford in my constituency about its work with young people.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I hope you will not mind if I share my thanks to all the teachers and wider organisations using their time, resources and creativity on financial education as part of our collective pursuit of supporting all young people to thrive. I look forward to hearing other contributions to the debate and continuing to work for change in this important area and for a fairer future for all.

3.48 pm

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) for bringing this immensely important debate before the House. I am sure that hon. Members will have seen the Barclays bank television advert explaining how money habits and behaviours are formed in young people by the age of seven, but Governments of all colours have continuously failed in promoting the teaching of sound financial management to young people. The education system is supposed to teach young people the game of life, yet currently we are not even teaching them the rules of the game before they play.

Previous Governments tried, with the coalition Government introducing it into the national curriculum in 2014, but little progress has been made since then. It is an indictment that one in two Brits were found to be unable to pass a financial literacy test run by the OECD. The UK is well below comparable western nations such as France, Norway and Canada; indeed, we rank alongside Thailand and Albania. How on earth can it be the case that, as one of the wealthiest countries in the world, that is where we sit?

Why is this of particular concern now? Technology has opened up a new world of consumerism. I am able to sit in the comfort of my own home and purchase pretty much any item I would like. It is the epitome of having the freedom to make one’s own financial decision. However, that freedom comes with an understanding of how choices will impact my own personal financial wellbeing. At the click of a mouse or even a touch of a

screen, young people can make high-value purchases without knowing how it may impact them, because they are not taught the importance of budgeting and saving.

Young people are becoming addicted to buy now, pay later schemes, which allow them to enter into credit agreements without fully assessing whether they will be able to afford them in a few months’ time. There is also the additional threat of fraudsters targeting young people in the hope that they will not know how to deal with complex financial problems. Is it any wonder that 96% of young people worry about money daily?

We must do something about this. The ongoing national curriculum review should not remove any aspect of the financial education that already exists, since it remains an important part of school life for students. I am not the only one saying that, as 95% of parents believe that schools should be at the heart of developing better understanding of financial education for young people. Alongside keeping it on the national curriculum, better support for teachers and long-lasting improvement is needed. I hear of teachers having real concerns about their own ability to teach students about sound money. I strongly urge the Department and its partners to instigate better advice for teachers on how to improve the quality of these lessons.

Finally, as a strong supporter of apprenticeships and vocational training, I would like the Government to promote financial teaching in post-16 educational settings. Put simply, one in three students leave school at 16 for apprenticeships or employment. At a time of increased spending, they potentially lose all chance of being taught financial education. Is it any wonder that nearly half of all apprentices struggle to keep up with their bills?

It would be negligence of the highest order not to protect and strengthen the financial education provision for our young people. We must not stand idle and allow the next generation to walk into financial ruin through not understanding the thing that, whether we like it or not, makes the world go round.

3.51 pm

Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) for bringing forward this important debate on something that we do not discuss enough. I was not hugely knowledgeable on it until my partner became a financial adviser; we have lots of financial discussions now. More often than not, she is telling me that I spend too much money on Warhammer. I say it is an investment—it is definitely not.

Those discussions opened my eyes massively, and some shocking things came up. For example, only 20% of self-employed people pay into a pension. That is a ticking time bomb, and we must address it. I really think that comes through education. As the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) said, our habits towards money are formed at an early age. The evidence for that is overwhelming, and as a Government we need to start getting on top of it. I saw my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) squint a little when Members were talking about changing what and how teachers should teach—he has a terrible poker face—but we need to look at how to introduce this across the board so that it does not put more pressure on teachers, because they are under enough under enough pressure as it is.

[Will Stone]

Some good things are going on in the private sector. We have great companies such as Nationwide, whose headquarters are in Swindon—something I am incredibly proud of. We also have Santander, which is not in Swindon, but it is still doing great work so I will give it praise. The Government need to work with some private companies to see what they are doing and what services they can offer alongside our schools, so that we can let our teachers teach and not overburden them.

I am really proud to be part of this debate. If we want to look after people and ensure that they do not suffer with mental health issues due to financial stress, we have to get a grip of this. I look forward to hearing what the Minister and other Members have to say.

3.53 pm

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) for securing this important debate. I find the statistics about what children remember of financial literacy education really sad. It is not that teachers do not want to provide the education but, as others have raised, there is stretched time in the current education system, and perhaps a lack of confidence among teachers.

I have a 17-year-old son, and have asked him a number of times whether he has had the opportunity to learn about budgeting at school. Perhaps this just speaks to the memory of a 17-year-old child, but he, like many of his friends, does not remember having had that important opportunity to learn how to budget—most likely, he did not. I sat down with him at the weekend to go through it, and realised how much we, as adults, take for granted the things that we have learned over the course of life. We should not be relying on the passage of time and the experience of life; we need to educate our young people about financial literacy from a really early age.

As a Liberal Democrat and as a mum, I think it is really important that we use the curriculum review to modernise it, and look at a curriculum for life. This is the perfect opportunity to include financial literacy. My personal view, which might raise eyebrows across the House, is that putting it into the maths curriculum might help young people to see maths as something that is relevant to their real lives. I am sure that we have all had conversations with teenagers who ask, “How is maths relevant to my life?” They say that it is not. Well, it very much will be when they get into adulthood and have to deal with mortgages, household budgeting and the rest.

The reality of household budgeting came to the forefront of my mind when I met with Christians Against Poverty in my constituency, which does fantastic work with people who have got into debt, often through no fault of their own—through the cost of living crisis and personal circumstances. However, at the root of it is often a lack of financial literacy. We clearly need to provide more opportunities for young people, as well as for adults, because we have already said that young people tend to get their financial education from their parents.

I ask the Minister to ensure that there is a deep commitment in the curriculum review to putting financial education into the curriculum in a way that will help children to remember it and take it forward in their lives. I also ask her to support adults to get the financial

education that they need so that they can complete the circle of empowering themselves to be better with their finances, and empowering the next generation.

3.57 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) for bringing this crucial conversation to the Chamber. We are not born with the ability to open an ISA, choose a private pension or invest our savings. We do not have a natural intuition about how to save or manage debt, or how the tax system works, so why are we sending young people from school with little or no formal financial education?

Having worked for Leicestershire Training and Enterprise Council 25 years ago, where we supported young people and adults into education, and having held a number of roles in the social housing sector supporting tenant welfare, it is clear to me that there is a gap in people's financial knowledge. I am really proud of some of the work that I did before coming to this place—particularly leading a team to set up the financial and digital inclusion project Moneywise for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland, targeting individuals, including in my constituency of North West Leicestershire, who were digitally and financially excluded. From running that project, the lack of basic skills around financial education, and how much it was holding people back, became clear to me. Through the project, we were able to empower people to have a much more positive relationship with their finances.

As a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, it has already become apparent to me that a lack of conversation and knowledge, and probably confidence, about long-term financial planning, is having a detrimental impact on our relationship with our finances. By providing financial education to young people, we have an opportunity to reset our relationship with money and skills. A study by Compare the Market and the financial education charity MyBnk found that almost two thirds of adults surveyed said that they did not recall receiving financial education at school. The same study found that only two in five respondents considered themselves financially literate.

There is hope, though. My son is currently studying core maths at AS-level, and we have had many conversations about financial management, from insurance to rent, and mortgages to savings, just because of that course. This is an issue that can unite us across party lines. Our young people deserve that. At the very least, they deserve a basic understanding of how to manage their future finances. It is not just current and future generations that could benefit; the Investing and Saving Alliance projected that, were the Government to prioritise financial education, we could inject an extra £7 billion into the economy each year. That would make a real, measurable and tangible difference to so many young people. I look forward to the Minister's response.

3.59 pm

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) for securing the debate and for his valuable work on the all-party parliamentary group on financial education for young people.

One of my first jobs was working in advice services. Time and time again, people came to us for help after they had stacked up debt. Many people had the same

story. It started out with not having a household budget and having to borrow on credit cards or through payday loans on astronomical rates of interest, and eventually they became caught in a spiral of debt and bad decision making. I would like to thank the wonderful staff and volunteers at the Citizens Advice service in my constituency, who do fantastic work trying to help people to get back on their feet after problems with debt. Work by BRANCAB—Bedworth, Rugby and Nuneaton Citizens Advice—and North Warwickshire Citizens Advice demonstrates that debt has changed for people in my constituency. Instead of loans and credit cards, the components of debt have moved, worryingly, to basic housing and utility costs. Before covid, financial capability was at the heart of what BRANCAB did and it won a national award for its work, until a lack of funding put an end to it.

My area has the fifth highest rate of insolvencies per 10,000 adults in the country, and 18 to 24-year-olds account for 12% of all insolvencies. This is why financial education is so crucial. Becoming insolvent before the age of 24 will have untold effects on their financial stability for years to come and we need to stop more young people falling into that hole. I support the recommendations of the Education Committee to review the content of the maths curriculum to expand the provision and relevance of financial education. That sentiment is shared by teachers at Polesworth school in my constituency. I support the work done by people such as Rob Boland, who runs Cotswold Independent Financial Services and works with the Personal Finance Society, which carries out important educational work around budgeting and tax, and staying safe from scams.

It is staggering that I have people coming to my surgery who have well-paid jobs but had no idea when they went to university about the impact of the debt they were signing up to with their student loan, or even what the interest rate meant. We must also recognise that our young people face new challenges. Social media has fuelled a get-rich-quick mindset, with influencers encouraging young people to try to make money quickly through risky schemes. That is exacerbated by the cost of living crisis. Perhaps if Liz Truss had spent a bit more time in financial education classes when she was at her grammar school in Leeds she would not have plunged the country into economic disaster. Too often we forget that our young people were hit hard by the crisis and are still suffering from financial insecurity.

I met sixth-form students at Nicholas Chamberlaine school in Bedworth recently. They talked to me about how much more difficult it was to find work at the weekends or in the evenings, and how they had never received any kind of education or help around personal finances. I am pleased that the Government have commissioned an expert-led curriculum and assessment review to ensure that young people leave school ready for work and ready for life. That, I know, is welcomed by local businesses in my constituency. It is time that we demystified everyday finances, so that everyone can be equipped with the skills they need for everyday life and do not have to turn to an advice service for help.

4.3 pm

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) for bringing forward

the debate and for the work he does on the all-party parliamentary group for financial education for young people.

I would love to see a world where everybody is financially literate, where people understand their finances, manage them properly, invest, save, manage debt and protect themselves appropriately—in other words, where people are financially savvy. It is good for people and it is good for our economy. Financial education develops tools for life and creates good habits. It can help people deal with cost of living challenges and help break down barriers to opportunity too, because making the most of resources when there are fewer of them is paramount. Many people lack the basic skills of financial acumen and that disadvantages them through life. However, if someone has a strong grasp of financial concepts, they are less likely to get into debt, can make better decisions and prosper. That is why financial education is a must for adults and children alike. I have a number of ideas about how we can help educate adults too in that area.

According to the Government-sponsored Money and Pensions Service, 39% of adults—more than 20 million people—do not feel confident managing their own money. Some 11.5 million people have less than £100 in savings, and 9 million of us are in serious debt. A Legal and General report, “Deadline to Breadline 2022”, suggests that

“the average UK consumer is just 19 days from the breadline” if they lose their income.

In my previous life in the banking sector, I knew only too well how a lack of financial management blights lives. I sadly saw several people throughout my career who did not plan and manage their finances appropriately or plan and protect their futures appropriately. When life took an unexpected turn and circumstances changed, I witnessed some incredibly sad situations where people lost everything. That story tells us of an urgent need for financial education programmes for adults and not just for children.

Of course, the key to having financially literate adults is to teach financial education in our schools. Although, as we have heard, it was added to the national curriculum in 2014, its delivery is patchy at best and it needs to be improved. A few years ago, I was invited to deliver a financial education session to a group of sixth-form students. Following the session, a few teachers came over, thanked me for what I had taught them and then asked me for some advice—and they were the teachers responsible for delivering that financial education to the pupils.

We have heard that financial education is included in the curriculum for secondary schools, but I too advocate for its inclusion in primary education. That could be done simply by embracing it in the maths syllabus. As a member of the all-party parliamentary group on financial education for young people, I support the recommendations that financial education be a mandatory part of the English primary curriculum. Training has to be given to teachers and the subject should be promoted by the Government in both primary and secondary education.

I want to finish with a story of a person whom I admire for their brilliant financial management: a single parent who juggled finances to bring up two boys. She literally had different pots for different funds, from summer holidays to Christmas to birthdays to her contingency fund for a rainy day. Each week, she would use her perfectly crafted budget book to separate out

[David Burton-Sampson]

her funds: so much for food, so much for bills and the remainder spread across her pots. She never relied on credit cards or borrowing. Her sons never wanted for anything, saw themselves as equals to their friends and would only really appreciate how stretched the family finances were when they got older. She had that skill embedded in her from a young age by her parents. That person was my mum.

Being financially educated early can have a profound effect on future generations. We need that change. It is an essential life skill, and I implore the Minister to consider that as part of the curriculum review.

4.8 pm

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) for his obvious passion for the subject.

In October 2023, National Trading Standards released research showing that 73% of UK adults have been targeted by scams, and just over a third of those lost money as a result. The Government are cracking down on online crime and fraud, but clearly one other long-term solution is to make sure that everybody is financially educated and financially literate. If we educate our children and young people to be more confident with how and why they manage their money, over time they will be less susceptible to those frauds and scams, which, sadly, can only grow with the development of artificial intelligence.

As we have already heard, many young people form their money habits at a very young age, as young as seven or eight. I remember my parents teaching me the importance of saving, giving me a little savings book and making sure that every week I put away some of the £3.50 that I earned from my job delivering newspapers. Unfortunately, as we have also heard, parents who have not managed to acquire financial literacy sometimes pass on bad habits to their children, and up to a third of British workers live from pay cheque to pay cheque. I fear that we are not doing enough to help parents and young people to break that cycle. I am shocked to hear people working in food banks say that many users of their services would benefit hugely from financial education and literacy, and even some simple advice on how to draw up a budget and understand how to make sure they will have enough money when the bills are being sent out. Even simple things can make a huge difference so that people do not have to end up relying on food banks.

With the future as yet unknown, pupils entering secondary school this September will finish their GCSEs in June 2030 and their A-levels in 2032. If they decide to go on to university, they might graduate in 2035. I think it safe to say that, while we do not know for sure what opportunities will be available to them—things may well look very different from the way they look now—good financial education and literacy will stand them in good stead. Financial literacy education has previously been added to the national curriculum, but more must be done to ensure that children are taught the subject.

Financial education must have breadth, teaching students not only how to budget and all the good stuff like simple versus compound interest, but enabling them to understand the importance of saving for a pension, and to recognise an investment scheme that is protected by the Financial Conduct Authority, for instance, so that they can avoid some of the more “sparkling” deals online.

The good news is that those who have received a financial education and remember it are more likely to save, feel confident about money and use a bank account. That shows that when effort is put in, it does indeed reap rewards.

The need for financial education is clear to everyone in the House and beyond. It is not a luxury but a necessity. I well remember being taught in depth about trigonometry, and I have to say that I wish I had been taught about pensions instead.

4.11 pm

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) for securing the debate.

A typical weekend for me starts at the shop, but not a high-street one, although there are plenty of those in York. Instead, it is my toddler's plastic shop full of fruit, veg and, of course, Yorkshire Tea. When I try to pay with cash, I am told, “No, daddy! Use card.” It is a world away from growing up, even in the 1990s.

We face a great paradox in this country. We have a world-leading financial services sector, but, according to a recent UK Finance report, the UK ranks 15th out of 29 countries for financial literacy among adults. It is imperative that we do better here at home. For too long we have struggled to bolster financial education in schools. My wife is a dedicated teacher, whose current battle is teaching children about the value and shape of a 20p coin. On a more serious note, however, I worry about the impact that social media has on children when it comes to financial advice. I call this the “Tiktokification” of financial education. We often see influencers giving out unregulated advice, driving the sale of harmful products plugged as “get quick rich” schemes. As a former regulator at the Financial Conduct Authority, I can say with some degree of certainty that regulators are not up to speed on this.

Let me now say something about the insurance sector. At the FCA, we saw that consumers had a poor understanding of matters such as “shrinkflation” when their policies did not keep up to date with their needs. Too rarely did they understand concepts such as auto-renewal. Far too many households, we find in Britain, are either under-covered or over-covered.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): My hon. Friend's speech has made me laugh, as his speeches usually do.

Through my family and the community in which I grew up, I have seen that many people who fall victim to scams were once extremely savvy about financial management. The people who fall into these traps once ran their own businesses or had quite a mature understanding of these things. Financial education has its limits, so we still need very strong protections. When many people have more than one insurance policy for the same thing, are we not failing them? They do not need education; they just need people they can go to who can protect them and give them advice on issues they may never fully understand.

Mr Charters: I will come on to scams, but on the question of advice, I welcome the FCA's advice guidance boundary review. Financial advice is often too difficult for consumers to access. We also need greater financial education on insurance.

I recently used Google Analytics to research search trends. Since 2004, there has been a rapid increase in the number of people searching “opt out of my pension.” How can we expect people to save into their pension when the benefits are so poorly communicated? The public are asked to fuel their car for a long journey, but when it comes to retirement, they do not know how far the road goes. We must make that cultural shift. With the forthcoming pension review, we must reinvent and reinvigorate our retirement savings. There is no more important time to educate people about pensions than at school.

Members will know that I am passionate about tackling fraud. Indeed, my old job was breaking fraud attempts in the private sector. Even now, as an MP, I hear heartbreaking stories of constituents who have fallen victim to scams. The British population is targeted by organised criminals from across the globe, which is driven by the popularity of the English language and the affluence of the UK. I know from a recent visit to City of London police that fraud and cyber-crime account for 50% of all crime—let that sink in. For too long, the UK has been a target. I praise the Minister for Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley North (Dan Jarvis), and Lord Hanson for their important work. Greater public awareness of how to spot a scam, and socialising some of these concepts, is important.

I praise Martin Lewis for raising awareness of celebrity impersonation scams, and I praise his Money and Mental Health Policy Institute for doing much to remove the stigma of being scammed. Greater education ultimately means greater fraud awareness. Financial education is not the sole responsibility of this House, this Government or even teachers. It is down to firms, and I am heartened by my engagement with the sector. StepChange has also done important work on debt advice. I give a special shout-out to the Financial Inclusion Commission, which I recently joined. When it comes to financial education, we must ensure that the financial sector plays its part.

I close by returning to my son’s plastic greengrocery. I am doing my bit for the next generation, but I am just one household. We have to think of new ways to engage the generation of tomorrow on things like pensions, scams and insurance. This requires financial education in schools, and I hope to play my part in that debate.

4.18 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) and my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Claire Hazelgrove) for securing this debate. I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) that a 20p coin is heptagonal.

I support the need for further financial education in schools, but as Members may have sensed from my poker face earlier, I have a few caveats. Please take them as constructive, rather than destructive.

Having worked for a homelessness charity, I know that people cannot budget their way out of poverty, but this conversation is not just about budgeting. It is about the wider views and ideas on financial education. Members on both sides of the House have recognised the power of teaching young people about some of these pitfalls and scams, such as the impact of turning to payday loan sharks when times are tough. It is not about telling

young people how they have to live their lives or what they have to do, but about providing awareness of the dangers that they face.

As many hon. Members will know, because I mention it in almost every speech I give, I used to be a teacher. I was a secondary school maths teacher for 15 years, teaching young people from year 7 to year 13, including teaching A-level maths and further maths, so I taught maths up to degree level. I absolutely love trigonometry. Wait until you get to further maths trigonometry, and sine and cosine rules, Madam Deputy Speaker—I can tell you, it is brilliant. I also specialise in statistics, strangely enough, despite my engineering degree. There is a misapprehension that the ability to teach maths equates—excuse the pun—to an ability to teach finance. If we were having the ordinary to and fro that we normally see in the Chamber, I would defend myself by pointing out that I can read a book, but I cannot teach English literature. Finance and maths both include numbers, but history and English both include words and they are different subjects.

When I chat to my Conservative friend—he is the reason I am in this place—we have very animated discussions about education. I once said to him, “What do you think is the most important skill for a teacher?” He said, “Well, discipline, and the ability to get marking done on time.” He came up with a whole list of things, but I said to him, “The one thing you have not mentioned is the ability to explain things clearly—surely that is the most important skill for a teacher.” I could teach the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham how to do compound interest, which comes up on the maths curriculum, but if I were asked to teach him how pensions work, I would struggle. That means not that I do not know how pensions work, but that I have not been taught the skills to teach that to somebody else. People do not naturally have the ability to explain things; they have to be trained in that skill.

I hope what I am saying, in a roundabout way, is seen as constructive, not critical. If we believe in financial education—[*Interruption.*] It is just like being back at school—put the phone in the box, Minister. You don’t have to really—[*Laughter.*] If we believe that teaching financial education is important in schools, then it has to be taught properly. The hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham correctly said that measures were brought through this place over 10 years ago, but the subject is not truly being taught in schools in the way that we would like it to be. I would like it to be a distinct, bespoke subject. At worst, it could be a module taught as part of a subject like business studies or economics—my wife is an economics teacher, so she will love me for that suggestion—rather than adding to the already extensive maths curriculum. I do not think it would be feasible to add financial education to the maths curriculum or that that would have the outcome that the House wants to see.

The hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham talked about the importance of financial education being measurable, and I could not agree more. One of my biggest frustrations as a maths teacher—have I got time, Madam Deputy Speaker? I will not go on a big story—was when a student would say to me, “Is this going to be in the exam?” That was frustrating because I genuinely love maths. I wanted to teach people that $a^2+b^2=c^2$, not because it was going to come up in the exam but because it is truly interesting.

Jerome Mayhew: It is the way he says it.

Chris Vince: I can see the hon. Gentleman was a model student.

We have to recognise the way the school system currently works. If young people think there will not be an exam on a subject, they do not think that subject is measurable. Equally, if teachers do not see that something is going to be measurable in an Ofsted inspection, it will be moved down the list of priorities. We have to recognise that a lot of teachers have a lot on their plates. If we want financial education to be on the top of the plate—the cherry on the top, perhaps—we need to ensure that it is measurable, accountable and taken seriously. I do not believe that bolting financial education on to the maths curriculum will make that happen; I would much prefer it to be a bespoke subject. I have rambled on enough but hopefully I have made my point.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

4.24 pm

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I am not quite sure how I am supposed to follow the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince). He was extremely entertaining and informative. I wish to thank the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) for securing this debate. He spoke with passion and empathy for those who are struggling with financial literacy and made sure that this House knows how important that topic is.

All Members in this House have probably at some point come across somebody—perhaps a constituent on a doorstep, a family member or a friend—who says that people just do not get taught what they need to know in life at school. That is overdone slightly; the fundamentals of maths, science and literacy do serve us well in life, but there is truth in that statement. Some of the hard, practical, daily challenges of adulthood are often not addressed properly, at least not in an applied way, during our education. Nowhere is this more apparent than in financial literacy, which is, of course, distinct from numeracy. It is not just about adding and subtracting, or even working out percentages, but budgeting, debt management, saving for the future and investing. These are things that can empower people to make better decisions for their lives and set them up to achieve their goals. But we let people down when we view these skills as specialist rather than essential.

Let me focus on two elements in particular: investing and debt. The British seem to have a big problem with investing. There is an assumption that it is for traders or the rich, and our national conversation tends to shy away from it. Pensions is about the only arena in which it is discussed properly, but even then it is kind of pushed to the back of our minds. It is all about auto-enrolment and it is dealt with out of sight by others. I wish to pick up on the point made by the hon. Member for Swindon North (Will Stone) about how few of the self-employed invest in their own pensions. That certainly happened to my parents who were self-employed all their life. I was self-employed too and, for the large bulk of my career, I did not invest in a pension.

If Brits were equipped with the knowledge and the skills to make relatively safe, sensible investments over the course of their lifetimes, the benefits to those individuals

and to the economy as a whole would be enormous. Research by Moneybox reveals that two thirds of Britons are £65,000 worse off on average due to low financial confidence and knowledge. Astonishingly, it suggests that if these people were better equipped it would equate to a potential £2 trillion of extra spending power in the UK economy over their lifetimes.

Members might think that this difference merely correlates with the haves and the have nots, but Moneybox's research found that, in most instances, the key indicator of success was financial confidence and not where people started in life. This alone should motivate us to improve the delivery of financial education in schools, but also to ensure that all adults can better equip themselves today. Although this is beyond the scope of the debate today, this is where the advice guidance boundary review could be crucial for Britain's growth prospects. We must upskill all of Britain today and not only the citizens of the future.

Let me turn now to debt. The consequences of getting this wrong are grave. Our failure to equip people with the knowledge that they need to manage and escape debt puts the most vulnerable in our society at risk—risk of hunger, risk of ill health and risk of financial ruin. My inbox is full of emails from people who reach crisis point before seeking help. In each case, there were so many straightforward steps that they could have taken to prevent escalation, but a combination of shame and financial illiteracy leaves people stranded, helplessly watching on as their situation goes from bad to worse.

I wish to pick up on the point made by the hon. Member for Harlow about people not being able to budget their way out of poverty. He is absolutely right, but we can stop people from spiralling and making things worse. This point is deeply personal to me. I have seen my family suffer from the crippling nature of debt on more than one occasion—both as a child and as an adult. I sometimes think to myself that I just wish that they had reached out to me sooner. But I have a better wish than that: I wish that our education system and society more broadly talked about debt and how to deal with it far more openly.

When I visited my local citizens advice bureau in Wallington recently, staff told me how predatory companies are offering individual voluntary arrangements to people who are totally ill-suited to them. On the face of it, the attraction is clear. Instead of struggling with debt on multiple fronts, a person can make one simple regular payment to a company and that company will deal with everything for them. The trouble is that these companies do not always act in the individual's interest. They have an incentive to sell IVAs, as they make money from them, and they end up being sold to people who have better alternatives, such as debt management orders. This practice needs to be regulated better, but we should also empower citizens to know better.

The Liberal Democrats support a modernised curriculum—a curriculum for life that ensures that children are equipped with the skills required for adulthood, with a focus on a better understanding of personal finance and financial responsibility. Clearly, financial education needs to start early and must become a key part of the primary curriculum. Research shows that money habits are set at the age of seven, yet there is no statutory requirement to teach personal finance in primary schools in England.

Furthermore, we must support teachers to deliver that education effectively. That means providing centralised guidance, teacher training and signposting to quality resources. The Government should back the national campaign to raise awareness of financial education and its benefits, and support initiatives such as My Money Week, which promotes financial literacy in schools and communities.

But the job does not end in school, and the urgent need to address financial illiteracy cannot be overstated. As the hon. Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) outlined, today's young people are increasingly turning to social media for financial advice. Just last week, the financial wellbeing charity Your Money found that six in 10 young people follow so-called financial influencers, or "finfluencers", which is difficult to say, with 77% trusting their advice. Alarming, one in 10 said that they would act on that advice without doing further research. If we do not fill the gaps, others will.

The Liberal Democrats will continue to push for measures that address financial exclusion. That can be done by supporting banking hubs, with their crucial offer of face-to-face advice, as well as by protecting funding for citizens advice bureaux, such as the one that I visited in Wallington. The evidence is overwhelming: financial education is not a "nice to have"; it is essential for the wellbeing of our citizens and the future of our economy. I urge the Government to act decisively and ensure that every child in the UK has access to the financial education that they need and deserve.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

4.31 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) on securing this important debate, and I commend him for his sustained efforts to drive up the quality and availability of financial education offered to our young people. There is sometimes a tendency in this House—perhaps an understandable one—to gravitate towards short-termism. It is therefore a sincere pleasure to follow my hon. Friend, who, along with his colleagues in the all-party parliamentary group on financial education for young people, has been doing such excellent work to promote reforms that take a longer view and are geared towards boosting the life chances of future generations.

Good financial education, delivered not only by schools, but by parents and families and within communities, has the potential to produce a generation wise to the dangers of credit card debt, alert to the practices of predatory payday lenders, and confident in their ability to open a bank account and budget appropriately. I believe that all of us in this place are truly committed to reducing inequality and ensuring that everyone has the best possible start in life, and I can think of few better ideas than ensuring that all young people enter adulthood with a sound grasp of how to manage their money.

The British public seem to share that assessment. A research survey of UK adults conducted by Santander revealed that a full 70% felt that better financial education in their younger years would have improved their ability to manage their finances through the ongoing cost of living crisis. Meanwhile, two thirds of young people believe that a lack of financial education has played a role in them amassing the debts that they hold.

Indeed, it is not just adults but children who are deeply concerned about financial matters. The London Institute of Banking and Finance reported in 2023 that 68% of children worry about money and their personal finances. That figure is hardly surprising when we consider that today's children are the most digitally exposed in history; they face a constant barrage of offers to spend money in alluring but wasteful ways. Many of the apps downloaded on to the phones that our children spend so much time on are full of shining icons, inviting them to spend real-world money, with the tap of a finger, in exchange for worthless in-game currencies. Young players of online games are prompted to spend, in some cases, hundreds of pounds on loot boxes or so-called cosmetic items—that is, a virtual in-game weapon, or an outfit that is a slightly different colour from the default option. Financial literacy is clearly a skill that our children and young people need, to protect them and prepare them for the future.

Although there is undoubtedly still work to be done, I briefly draw the House's attention to the solid foundations laid by successive Conservative Governments over the past 14 years. After all, the Conservatives left England as one of the top-performing countries in education. Under the Conservative Government, children in England were named the best in the west for reading, and were ranked best at maths in the western world in the 2023 TIMSS—trends in international mathematics and science study. It was a Conservative Government who created the national network of 40 maths hubs to support schools in improving their mathematics teaching. That network is a partnership between schools, colleges and other organisations that work together to provide support for maths teaching in their regions. The positive impact of those hubs on young people's ability to manage and understand money and finance is obvious. We were clear that we intended to go further: at the last election, we set out a comprehensive plan to ensure that every child studied maths to the age of 18, so that they would leave school with good numeracy skills. That would help them to navigate their finances with confidence.

That is not to suggest that the entire burden of providing robust financial education can or should fall upon our schools. As is so often the case, families also have a central role to play in ensuring that children are imbued with good financial common sense. That does not need to be overly complex; simple measures, such as offering children small amounts of weekly pocket money, can help to normalise good habits such as saving and thinking carefully before making purchases. According to an ING survey of 12,000 parents across Europe, giving children pocket money reduces the risk of them getting into debt as adults.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am a great example of that. Whenever I was 16, my mum took me down to Northern Bank, as it was then, gave me £10—I could have bought a second-hand car for that in those days—and told me to put it in my bank account. Does the hon. Lady agree that if everybody had a mother like mine, they would be a lot better off?

Rebecca Paul: I thank the hon. Member for that great contribution to the debate. I agree that all those small things add up and make a difference to our financial literacy. I am a chartered accountant, but that is not

[Rebecca Paul]

what made me financially literate; it was the lessons I was taught by my family, and the jobs that I did when I was young. Members have given great examples of how they came to understand finance. In an increasingly contactless world, it is important that children and young people physically see and feel cash. That is the way in which value is tangibly understood.

To return to schools, financial education is not, as has been noted, a statutory part of the national curriculum in primary schools in England, but in contrast, in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, it is very much embedded at primary level. Given the way in which our children are relentlessly pressured to spend money that they may not even have, and in the light of Cambridge University research suggesting that habits and attitudes towards money are formed by the age of seven, there is much logic to the argument that financial education—whether delivered by schools, parents or even community hubs and other organisations—should not wait for the later years, and should be continuous.

Teachers also feel that starting good financial education early is important for the future wellbeing of young people. According to a 2020 survey, 82% of primary teachers consider teaching financial education to be very important. We may hear more about that when the Francis review of the national curriculum is complete. I urge the Minister to answer the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham asked about the Government's plans for the curriculum.

In secondary schools, the picture is somewhat different. In 2014, the then Conservative Government acted to ensure that financial education was placed on a statutory footing in local authority schools. However, the all-party parliamentary group on financial education for young people—which I once again praise as an outstanding example of everything an APPG should aspire to be—noted in its 2023 “Building Beyond Barriers” report that over half of teachers did not know that financial education was part of the curriculum at all. That is a matter of some concern.

It is certainly important that the topic of financial education is addressed in the classroom in an appropriate way. I have no doubt that our hard-working teachers are keen to play their part in delivering that content. The same report found that three in four teachers believed that they should play a leading role in imparting financial skills to children. The obstacles were reported to be inadequate training, limited funding and an understandable feeling that there is simply not sufficient time in the school year to deliver those lessons. In government, the Conservatives sought to mitigate the funding issue with an investment of over £1 million to embed and scale teacher training in financial education.

The Money and Pensions Service did excellent work developing and testing approaches to supporting teachers, and practitioners working with children and young people in vulnerable circumstances, to deliver financial education. Ultimately, though, we must acknowledge that the school timetable is already under intense pressure, and there are many competing calls on limited time. That is why I would argue that the good financial education that every child deserves is best delivered not only in schools, but in the family setting, in communities, and with the help of valuable resources.

I conclude with a simple message, which I hope underscores some of the excellent contributions that we have heard today: financial education is invaluable and transforms life outcomes. Research undertaken by Compare the Market tells us that today, just two fifths of young adults rank as financially literate. We can and must do better. Conservative Members will keep these matters under careful review, and I hope that the Minister will address the questions that have been raised. Once again, I thank all those who have spoken, and in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham.

4.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): I congratulate the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) on securing a debate on this important subject. I also thank the all-party parliamentary group on financial education for young people for highlighting the importance of financial education through its focused inquiries, and I absolutely recognise that it is an esteemed APPG. I will endeavour to respond to the points that the hon. Member has made, but I also wish to acknowledge the many points made by hon. Friends and hon. Members from across the Chamber.

My hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Claire Hazelgrove) spoke about people's confidence in making the financial decisions that are right for them, and highlighted the fact that she mentioned financial education in her maiden speech. The hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) spoke about online purchases and the importance of making sure that we fully understand what is happening in that space. My hon. Friend the Member for Swindon North (Will Stone) spoke about self-employed people and the need to understand pensions. The hon. Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin) spoke about the importance of financial literacy from an early age.

Many other hon. Members—my hon. Friends the Members for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack), for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor), for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson), for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones) and for York Outer (Mr Charters)—spoke about investments, banks, parents, and various things to do with financial education for children and young people. My hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince), a teacher himself, spoke passionately about financial education, and I should add that the alarm that went off was a school alarm. Of course, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul), also spoke about this important topic.

The skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviour that help people to manage money and achieve good financial wellbeing begin to develop from an early age and continue to develop through childhood and the teenage years. Research shows that financial education in schools has a positive impact on children's and young people's financial capabilities. The Money and Pensions Service's survey of children and young people found that those who recall learning about money at school were more likely to be active savers, have a bank account that they used, be confident with money management, and have positive attitudes towards money. It is so important to teach those things at the right time, and it is never too early to start. Young people may be making financial

decisions about digital transactions and in-game currencies, and they need to be aware of the issues and potential dangers.

Maths underpins effective financial management, understanding of financial risk and the confident and competent application of financial skills and tools. The Programme for International Student Assessment shows a strong correlation between results in financial literacy and in maths, with an average correlation of 0.87 across OECD countries. The primary maths curriculum includes arithmetic knowledge that supports pupils' abilities to manage budgets and money, such as knowledge to do with calculations involving money and percentages.

In secondary maths, pupils are taught topics such as how to calculate compound interest, which is relevant for personal finance.

The non-statutory primary citizenship programme of study at key stages 1 and 2 equips pupils to understand the sources and purpose of money and the benefits of savings. It makes it clear that financial contexts are useful for learning about making choices and exploring social and moral dilemmas. The national curriculum for citizenship at key stages 3 and 4 prepares students to manage their money well and plan for future financial needs. Key stage 3 covers the functions and uses of money, day-to-day money management, budgeting and managing risk. Key stage 4 covers income and expenditure, credit and debt, insurance, savings, pensions, and financial products and services. However, more obviously needs to be done to embed learning and ensure that children and young people fully understand it.

The computing curriculum provides the fundamental e-safety knowledge and thinking skills that empower children to make well-informed decisions about technology, which may include using it in a financial context. Through statutory relationships, sex and health education, pupils are taught about internet safety and online harms, such as the risks associated with online gambling and the accumulation of debt. Pupils also learn how debt is generated, collected, shared and used online.

Moving to the curriculum and assessment review, which has been mentioned by Members across the Chamber, high and rising school standards are at the heart of the opportunity mission for this Government. That is why we have established an independent, expert-led curriculum and assessment review, covering ages from five to 18, chaired by Professor Becky Francis CBE. The review seeks to deliver an excellent foundation in core subjects, including maths, and a rich and broad, inclusive and innovative curriculum that readies young people for life and work. The review group will publish an interim report in early spring setting out its interim findings and confirming the key areas for further work, and it will publish its final report with recommendations this autumn. We will take decisions on what changes need to be made in the light of those recommendations.

Ofsted inspections currently consider whether pupils are receiving a rounded education and evaluate the quality of education, including pupils' achievement over time, behaviour and attitudes, personal development, and leadership and management. All schools, regardless of category and phase, are inspected for their ability to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum. Ofsted inspectors evaluate the quality of education, and elements of financial education may be in scope when Ofsted conducts a deep dive into mathematics.

The Government's Money and Pensions Service is an arm's length body of the Department for Work and Pensions, with a statutory duty to co-ordinate the UK strategy for financial wellbeing. It published the UK strategy for financial wellbeing in January 2020, which is a 10-year framework to help UK citizens make the most of their money and pensions. One of the key themes of the strategy is supporting the financial wellbeing of children and young people. It set a national goal to ensure that 2 million more children and young people receive a meaningful financial education by 2030.

As a Government, we will consider further the suitability of the support available to schools in the light of the curriculum review outcomes. However, it may be helpful to the House if I set out what is already available by way of support. The Money and Pensions Service has published guidance setting out how schools can improve the financial education they deliver, and signposting to services and resources. The financial education quality mark, funded by the Money and Pensions Service and delivered by Young Enterprise, quality-assures resources for teachers and others to support the provision of financial education. Resources with the financial education quality mark are freely available on the Young Money resource hub.

Support for curriculum delivery is also available through optional, free and adaptable resources from Oak National Academy. Oak has completed its initial curriculum resources for maths, and it will be producing additional lessons on financial education and applying maths in real life contexts across key stages 1 to 4. Those are expected to be available from spring 2025, and lessons on finance and the economy also featured in Oak's new citizenship curriculum, launched earlier this academic year. Teaching resources for those lessons will be released by autumn 2025.

His Majesty's Treasury works closely with the financial services sector to ensure that providers play a role in supporting people to manage their money. In 2021, financial services organisations were the largest funders and providers of financial education programmes, with 46 programmes reaching 4.7 million children and young people, and a total spend of £7.5 million. In 2023, members of UK Finance, including banks and other financial service providers, provided financial education lessons to more than 4.1 million children and young people in schools and community settings.

On 5 December it was announced that the Government will develop a financial inclusion strategy, alongside a supporting committee to tackle the problem of financial exclusion. The Government will work with consumer groups and industry on the development of that strategy, which will aim to tackle barriers to individual and household ability to access affordable and appropriate financial products and services. As part of that, the committee will consider the role played by financial capability in consumer use and understanding of products.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham for securing this debate, as well as those who have contributed to it so knowledgeably and articulately. Many schools already have high-quality financial educational provision in place, but every child and young person should have every opportunity to achieve and thrive. The reforms I have set out will ensure that every child is set up for the best start in life, including a curriculum that is rich, broad, inclusive, innovative, and that readies young people for life and

[Janet Daby]

work. There is always much that needs to be done, and we must and do take responsibility. We will build on our early efforts and work at pace to ensure that every child has the qualified expert teachers they need.

We recognise that training needs to evolve so that teachers remain competent and confident to teach and adapt the curriculum. That is why the work of the Money and Pensions Service, through its data collection, national strategy and delivery plans is so important. We must continue to work closely across the Government and in partnership with others to ensure that we approach challenges in a co-ordinated and evidence driven way. We will consider what more we can do in the context of the curriculum and assessment review, with workforce reforms to ensure that the financial education pupils receive is relevant and taught with passion by confident and committed teachers.

4.52 pm

Jerome Mayhew: I thank Young Enterprise, the secretariat of the all-party group on financial education for young people, the Money and Pensions Service, GoHenry, MyBnk, HSBC, Santander, Your Money, Money Wellness, the Institute and Faculty of Actuaries, AQA, UK Finance, and the Bank of England, who all briefed in advance of this debate. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Claire Hazelgrove), my co-conspirator in the debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) on her first outing at the Dispatch Box. I thought she did brilliantly.

When talking about financial education, I start with my own family. I realised that I may have gone a bit too far when one of my grown-up children confided to me recently that she feels physically sick every time she spends money, so I may have overdone it a little. Equally, 175 years ago, my forebear, Henry Mayhew, was declared bankrupt for the third time. His great friend was Charles Dickens, and it is said that the character of Mr Micawber was based on Henry, so I will end the debate with one of the more famous quotes from Mr Micawber:

“Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen and six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty-pound ought and six, result misery.”

How right he was.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered financial education.

Manufacturing and Engineering (Northern Ireland)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Gen Kitchen.*)

4.54 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I usually have the graveyard shift down in Westminster Hall on a Thursday afternoon. I think this exceeds that, given the time. It is a pleasure to have this important debate. I am pleased to see the Minister for Industry, the hon. Member for Croydon West (Sarah Jones), in her place. She has seen my asks, so I hope she can respond to them. I am also pleased to see the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland here, too. I will try to focus on the pluses that we have, and I then have a number of questions to ask the Minister. As she has seen those in advance, I hope we can have a positive glass half-full debate. That would be great.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is not often we get to share time together, but you have me whether you like it or not, for at least half an hour or thereabouts. I am so appreciative of this time in the House to highlight the needs of the manufacturing and engineering industry in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland has fast become a giant in aerospace. We have a skilled workforce, lower overheads and the perfect connectivity for business investment. That is what we have and that is what we do.

We have not only the manufacturing giant Spirit AeroSystems, but Wrightbus, Harland and Wolff and Thales—the list goes on. They are all supplied with specialist parts by a plethora of skilled smaller engineering firms that dot throughout the Province, in particular in Strangford. I must make clear from the outset that when I talk about the manufacturing industry today, I do not just mean the big firms; I am thinking of all the smaller firms that rely on this business. The impact on the local economy is massive. Indeed, Invest NI has highlighted that manufacturing accounts for some 11% of employment and 15% of gross value added, making it a key sector in the Northern Ireland economy. I underline that it is a key sector, and I cannot underline that enough. It is vital for Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland is home to five companies with the SC21 supply-chain quality system gold award, out of a total of nine across the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland is again, as the Secretary of State will know, kicking on and working above the standards that many have for the United Kingdom. With five out of nine, we have more than any other UK region. We offer a reliable, successful, and competitive supply chain, with expertise in key technologies.

For automobiles, we are the world-leading region for the supply of tyre pressure monitoring systems, and we have leading capability in the manufacture of complex aluminium castings, as well as key strengths in the production of composite vehicle bodies for leading sports car brands. We do much in Northern Ireland. We have world-class solutions in the design and manufacture of mobile bulk processing and wet-processing equipment. When people buy from Northern Ireland, they buy 60 years of leading the world in mobile bulk materials processing equipment, and we manufacture more than 40% of the world's mobile crushing and screening equipment.

Again, I want to say these things because Northern Ireland often leads the way, and it is always a privilege to come and tell not only the world, but this Chamber about that.

The low-carbon sector employs more than 12,000 people in more than 300 companies, with an annual turnover in excess of £1.7 billion. Northern Ireland companies have the capability of providing a range of innovative products and services to address the specific needs of the various energy and water supply chains. The wastewater sector in Northern Ireland had a turnover of £1.1 billion in 2019, a GVA of £0.8 billion and 7,000 employees.

Northern Ireland is one of the most diverse consumer goods sectors in the UK, offering a wide range of design and manufacturing-based companies. More than 4,800 people are employed in the sector. Our companies have developed manufacturing capabilities and design or technology-led products and continue to remain competitive in a global marketplace. While that is the foundation of the big picture of manufacturing in Northern Ireland, I also highlight that we are yet to meet our potential, which simply cannot be met without greater investment, knowing that for every penny spent, the local economy reaps the benefit in pounds.

With that in mind, I have been in contact with and met the GMB and Unite unions representing Spirit, who have indicated the support needed in the sale of business transition. Spirit AeroSystems facilities in Northern Ireland produce parts for a variety of aircraft manufacturers, with about 45% of production on the wing and fuselage for Airbus. That work employs—

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Gen Kitchen.)

Jim Shannon: I knew what was happening there; I just had not looked up at the clock. It is a pleasure to continue the debate.

I referred to the Airbus fuselage and how that work employs 33% of the 3,700-strong labour force. Labour-intensive contracts equate to some 47% of production—work for Bombardier and small aircraft manufacturers such as HondaJet and Rolls-Royce—and the remaining about 20% of work is in engineering IT, human resources, quality assurance and so on.

It is really important that we focus, if we can, on where we are. Boeing's interest in purchasing Spirit is primarily about consolidating its own supply chain to ensure quality control. It has no interest in retaining production for its primary competitor, Airbus. Currently, Airbus's intention is to take control of Spirit operations in its own supply chain; it has no interest in production for other aircraft producers.

Further challenge is posed by the fact that operations across Spirit sites are integrated. Workers are employed across different projects for different clients, so even if a division of activities under separate ownership were possible, it is unclear whether those operations could be sustained. That is one of our concerns. I look to the Minister and to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for some help on that. I believe the opinion of the unions is that the facilities must remain under one owner, as that is the only option that would guarantee

and safeguard production. Airbus already operates a model that would make the retention of highly skilled jobs in Northern Ireland possible through, for instance, integration into the Airbus Atlantic group. That would include production sites across five different countries—that gives flexibility and strength across continents. Airbus already operates contracts with a variety of partners including, again, Bombardier, Dassault Aviation and ATR.

The Northern Ireland facilities are critical to Airbus and its future growth. Belfast is a vital supplier to the A220, and it cannot risk any disruption to production by taking control of the entire site. A single owner could avoid the outsourcing problems that have plagued Boeing, and disruption could also bring liability for hefty financial penalties. I have to underline that the workers in Belfast, who have given many years of service—their blood, sweat and tears—were the innovators and builders of the Airbus project. The unique expertise in Belfast cannot be easily replicated elsewhere. It is unique to us in Belfast, and it is important that it is retained as such.

According to reports, Spirit Belfast will be profitable if production increases to the planned-for 14 aircraft a month in 2025. The non-Airbus work at Spirit Belfast could be viewed as a bonus for Airbus, not a burden. Spirit Belfast has also recently signed two promising new contracts with successful aerospace companies that are likely to improve the plant's profitability. Bombardier, which represents some 30% and growing of the work done at Spirit Belfast, has also been a customer for 35 years. There is clear continuity on the base and among the workforce.

All local political representatives and all parties across all of Northern Ireland, Spirit management and the Department agree with our demand for a one-owner solution as the best outcome for all workers, the aerospace sector and the wider Northern Ireland economy. However, to date, disappointingly—I say this with respect; I always do because that is the person I am—the chief executives of all the respective companies and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland have failed to engage with senior stewards or the workforce. If that has changed, I will be more than happy, but whenever I met them a few weeks ago, that had not happened. They appear to be leaving thousands of jobs and livelihoods at risk or of being dictated to by the market.

This decision is not acceptable; neither is it in the best interests of the 3,700 workers impacted. It is imperative that the next course of action is to maintain and future-proof the highly skilled jobs and the approximately 7,400 jobs intertwined via the supply chain in the Northern Ireland economy. That would continue a vibrant and historic aerospace sector in Northern Ireland. The workforce need the support of central Government. I am quite sure that the Minister and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will reassure us.

Why is this important? Spirit AeroSystems is a linchpin of the economy in the greater Belfast area. Statistical analysis from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, "Structure of the Northern Ireland Economy 2020", published in September 2024, estimates that for every job sustained in the non-automobile vehicle production sector in Northern Ireland, almost two more jobs in the broader economy, local services and the supply chain are sustained through indirect and induced

[Jim Shannon]

employment. For every one job, there are two more out there, so we get three for the price of one. Considering the high value-added nature of Spirit's activities, with very developed local supply chains both regionally and across Britain and Ireland, that ratio is even higher. It is estimated that the 3,700 jobs at the company's site in Northern Ireland sustain a further 7,400 indirect and induced jobs in the wider service economy and supply chain, based on the NISRA type II employment multiplier for manufacturers of other transport equipment.

The data is clear, and we need the help. Any threat to Spirit's operations in Northern Ireland translates to a potential threat to more than 11,000 jobs in the wider economy. Such a threat would be devastating for the Northern Ireland economy, as the wages bill for the Spirit workforce alone amounts to approximately £250 million a year, contributing a large percentage of the region's total economic consumption. It is not small fry; it means a lot to the Northern Ireland economy, as does the skill factor of those jobs.

The total expenditure of the company is estimated to be at least £600 million a year. The loss of this productive activity would have a huge impact on the Northern Ireland economy. This is key, vital and really important. Based on the 2024 NISRA estimate from a type II economic multiplier for the manufacture of other transport equipment, a reduction of £600 million in demand would reduce Northern Ireland's gross value added by £1.4 billion. That is more than 3% of the region's total annual economic output. That illustrates the vital importance of this sector.

Spirit's production is also a critical element of Northern Ireland's heavy industrial base and a key driver for exports. It is vital to the realisation of any regional manufacturing or industrial strategy that may be agreed at the Stormont Executive. These jobs represent some of the best employment opportunities for individuals who come from the working-class areas of Belfast and the wider community. The Secretary of State and the Minister know that—we all do. The cross-community employment at the sites benefits all working-class areas, with the jobs created having a profound impact on the transition away from a conflictual society. I know the Secretary of State is committed to that. I want that for our society. This is part of how we do that: we give people jobs and opportunity across the community, to help the community to heal and to move forward. I would certainly like to see that.

Youth employment opportunities in the aerospace sector are always attractive to young workers from all communities who are seeking to improve their lives. Just before Christmas, my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and I visited the Thales factory. I was really impressed by their commitment to opportunities for apprentices. They are helping apprentices to earn a wage, and they look after student fees. They do not want just an apprentice; they want someone for their entire working life in that factory.

I am concerned that any loss of these skilled jobs would cast a very dark cloud over communities in Northern Ireland that are still emerging and transitioning from the legacy of conflict, at a critical juncture in the history of Northern Ireland. I never doubt that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is committed to

finding a way forward. This is part of the healing process, moving forward and bringing us together. I ask the Minister gently to get involved—I do not mean that aggressively—and I ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to expend every effort to advance a one-owner entity and ensure that, whoever buys Spirit AeroSystems' operations in Northern Ireland, the vital social and economic importance of the jobs that it provides is fully recognised and safeguarded. That is in the interests of all stakeholders, and this great mother of Parliaments of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It must be the overriding priority in the coming weeks and months.

I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all those who have attended tonight: the Minister, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and his shadow, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), who has a deep interest in Northern Ireland. I speak as the MP for Strangford, and on behalf of the business and homes involved. It is not just about jobs; it is about every one of the 11,000 people who have a home, a mortgage and a family. Those people contribute to Northern Ireland, and want to contribute positively going forward. They are supported by the manufacturing industry, which, importantly, needs the involvement of the Government to secure a good deal. With a new US Administration and a desire to enhance relations between our nations, I believe that now is the time for action. I look to the Minister with the greatest respect, in anticipation of what she will tell us.

5.11 pm

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for introducing today's debate in his usual style of gentle persistence, and for the birthday message that he sent me back in December. I think he is the only Member of Parliament who sends birthday messages to every MP. The care with which he treats all of us is an example to us all.

I have a list here of all the good things about Northern Ireland manufacturing. The hon. Member has listed most of them already. For the benefit of the House, I will not repeat the case that he has made; I will just set out a few things about the Government's approach. First, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and I, and others, were in Northern Ireland when we were able to announce a successful outcome on the Harland and Wolff deal. When we first came to power last July, it was one of the early industries in distress that came across our desks. We were faced with the possible collapse of Harland and Wolff, and there was absolutely no way we could allow that to happen. We all worked very hard to ensure that there was a deal that worked both for the Ministry of Defence, in terms of the fleet solid support contract for Navantia, and its commercial interests and what it could do, and for the workers of Harland and Wolff.

We did not do that because we are good people and we did not want to see job losses, although those things are true; we did it because the four Harland and Wolff sites are of incredible strategic importance to us. As it happens, I was in Methil yesterday, the Harland and Wolff site in Fife, where there is a huge future for offshore wind. The site can build part of that future. Sometimes we look through misty eyes at what has

happened in the past in Belfast, and what Harland and Wolff used to be. The way we see it is: let us look at what it can be in the future, and how important it is. Of course it is important for people to have good well-paid jobs, but it is the talent and expertise they bring—which I see in spades in Northern Ireland every time I go; the enthusiasm, the talent, the training and the apprenticeship programmes—that mean we can build the future we want to see. They will be very important for our defence, but the whole ecosystem the hon. Gentleman talked about is very important for our future.

What support can the Government bring to ensure that people continue to flourish and thrive? First, we want to work collaboratively across the nations in a way that is productive and useful. I chair the business and industry inter-ministerial group in the Department for Business and Trade. At our first meeting, the hon. Gentleman's colleagues in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland were there, too. What we can do collectively that helps all our nations is really important.

Secondly, the Government set the structure, through the industrial strategy, and a direction of travel that industry can understand. The hon. Gentleman will know that we are developing the industrial strategy. There are eight growth sectors where we think there is the biggest capacity for growth. We are working on honing down what the sub-sectors are within that. Advanced manufacturing, defence and green energy are all key areas that we have identified as opportunities for growth and Northern Ireland has such a role to play in that space. That architecture, which will provide the long-term stability over the next five to 10 years, will be really important and helpful.

The third bit of architecture is our universities, colleges, catapults, Innovate UK and all the other networks that help us to come up with new ideas and new businesses. I met Catapult Network chief executives this morning. They told me about—they were keen that I mention it in this debate, as I said I was coming here—some of the innovative work going on through the catapults in Northern Ireland. They are working with Invest Northern Ireland on hydrogen, which will accelerate supply chains for the hydrogen economy. They are working with Queen's University Belfast to ensure that Northern Ireland's manufacturing businesses can connect into national capabilities and help address future challenges. There is a lot of good work going on there.

The next bit of architecture is how we help all those businesses in Northern Ireland to export. I was in Saudi Arabia two weeks ago, alongside Invest Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland businesses, which were taking their huge talent and, I hope, doing some good deals. There was a business—I might get this wrong and have to tell *Hansard* to correct this—that makes kit that washes sand. It has washed 99% of the sand that needs to be washed—I am going to stop trying to go into detail!—in Qatar. It was a very small business in Northern Ireland that was, basically, providing a service to Qatar that nobody else could do. That was quite extraordinary, but that is the talent we have coming out of Northern Ireland and we want to work with Invest NI on that. We need to get the right architecture in place to ensure the future is bright.

I think what the hon. Gentleman also wants me to talk about is how we protect what we have. He made a very good case on Spirit and how it is not just the jobs,

but the supply chain and all interactions. He used some very interesting statistics on the potential impact of closures. What I will say in this space is, first, that we all want the same thing. Secondly, just to correct the record, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South (Hilary Benn) has met the trade unions to talk about that. I was at Spirit on 19 December and talked about the future. I have talked to all interested parties in this space. Collectively as a Government—the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my right hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds)—we are trying to do what we can. It is a complex situation, as we know, and there are layers of complexity in terms of who does what. We are trying to do what we can. Government can only do what they can in trying to bring people together, come up with solutions and talk to those interested parties, but I think we are pushing in the right direction. Although I cannot click my finger and have the answer that the hon. Gentleman wants this evening, I can give him the commitment that we are doing what we can. If he has suggestions as to further meetings we could hold and things we could do, of course, I would be very happy to do that. I am having conversations regularly on Short Brothers and Spirit AeroSystems, as the hon. Gentleman would expect. I am talking to the aerospace industry, Boeing and all the interested parties.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I am happy that the meeting has taken place. Whenever I met them—it would have been three or even four weeks ago—they informed me that the meeting had not taken place. I am glad that it has, because that is better. When it comes to moving forward in Northern Ireland, things only ever happen when we all work together. That is important.

I also thank the Minister and the Secretary of State for what they have done in relation to Harland and Wolff. We appreciate that. I know it was complex and difficult, and that there were things they could not say when we asked in the past and things were happening behind the scenes. Could the Minister be involved in those contacts with Spirit and Unite and the GMB unions, again with the Secretary of State? That contact is important. I say to the Minister that she should bring people with her. If we bring people with us, we always win the case.

Sarah Jones: I am always happy to meet the trade unions. I think I spend more time with trade unions in government than I did in opposition. We are forever meeting, usually in very happy circumstances where we are all trying to push to the same end in terms of building industry and creating growth. I am therefore always happy to meet and to do that. Of course, it is not just Ministers who are in conversation; I should say that the officials are also talking to all the interested parties, just to see what can be done. But I will not deny that it is a challenge.

The two-pronged approach of trying to ensure we have the architecture to build our manufacturing and our industry in Northern Ireland, alongside trying to see if we can find a solution when it comes to Spirit, is the right thing to do. We should not ignore one or the other; we need to try with both and that is what we will do.

[Sarah Jones]

Encouraging new investment into Northern Ireland is also part of the picture. The Government's investment summit and the work through the Office for Investment and the Minister for Investment really focuses on the strengths of a region and an area—the strength of a nation in this case—and the wonderful manufacturing ecosystem that we should be able to build on and which should be a very attractive proposition to investors who want to come in and expand.

I could talk more about some of the other examples of good practice and exciting things that are happening in Northern Ireland, but I do not want to keep the House longer than is necessary. The hon. Member has made the case very well, and I agree with everything that he has said.

Jim Shannon: I suppose the thrust of all the good things—we do not deny them but welcome them because they are good things—is to have the sale as one entity. On behalf of the workers, I especially ask the Minister to commit to looking at what more can be done for the Spirit workers. They are skilled, they are experienced

and they are critical to Northern Ireland's manufacturing base. That is my request to the Minister: to sell it as one entity and keep the workers.

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. He is now looking at his phone. I do not know whether the unions are messaging him during the debate, but if so, it is very effective.

Of course I will do whatever is useful in this regard. Commercial decisions are being made; we cannot influence all of them, but we can do what we can, and we are trying. We have a very skilled workforce that we do not want to lose, and I am happy to meet, work with and walk alongside our colleagues who are working in Northern Ireland.

I thank the hon. Member for initiating the debate. It is always a joy to talk about what is happening in Northern Ireland, and even more of a joy to be there and see it. I look forward to doing that again soon.

Question put and agreed to.

5.25 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 6 February 2025

[MRS EMMA LEWELL-BUCK *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Rail Services: Open Access Operators

1.30 pm

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered open access operators for rail services.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I am sure you will witness a stimulating debate.

I start by drawing attention to the progress made on the east coast main line, where today three privately owned open access inter-city operators compete with the Government-run LNER. This successful and mature model is now 25 years old and sees open access operators connect towns and cities across the north that were traditionally not served, or that endured poor inter-city connections. Open access is a great success. The statistics reflect that on many fronts, and I will come on to the detail.

One group of towns that open access has not yet reached consists of Grimsby, Cleethorpes and the intermediate stations. I am determined that the Brigg and Immingham constituency and the wider northern Lincolnshire area enjoy more direct and fast trains connecting with London and other key cities. I have been campaigning for such a service since 2011 and remain committed to delivering this key and long overdue connection. I hope Members will indulge me if I focus on this constituency matter for a few minutes before moving on to the wider arguments.

From a Grimsby point of view, it matters not whether the service leaves the main line at Newark and runs via Lincoln, or whether it leaves at Doncaster and takes the route through Scunthorpe. Either route will also serve Grimsby, Cleethorpes, Barnetby and Habrough. Habrough is just two miles from the country's largest port, Immingham. For that reason alone, it surely deserves a direct service to the capital.

Some years ago, Grand Central submitted an application to run services via Doncaster, which was turned down by the regulator. I have been raising this issue with successive Ministers for many years, and I have been given no end of reasons why it cannot happen. First, there was the question of capacity on the main line. That is not a problem if the existing services to Lincoln are extended to Cleethorpes, however, because they already have a path from King's Cross through to Newark. LNER ran a trial of their Azuma units through to Cleethorpes and found no serious issues, other than at Market Rasen, which requires a new footbridge and some work on the platform. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) may have something to say on that during the debate.

It now appears that the problems at Market Rasen are being put forward as the reason why services cannot go ahead. If the reported costs of between £15 million and £20 million for the work at Market Rasen are to be believed, Network Rail needs to improve its procurement process and find new contractors. Quite simply, those figures are ridiculous, and it sounds more like a tactic to convince Ministers not to go ahead. I trust that the Minister will address that point in his response.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) on securing this debate, and I am very pleased to support him in it. He has been a long-standing campaigner on this issue. On the point about platform improvements at Market Rasen, is he aware of other areas in the country that are getting modular platform extensions, which are proving to be much cheaper than the price he mentioned?

Martin Vickers: My Member of Parliament makes an excellent point. There are indeed other examples, up and down the country, where modest improvements have been made at minimal cost. It needs the Secretary of State to realise the economic benefits to the area, and she will surely see that this is an easy win to deliver on the Government's growth agenda.

The establishment of Great British Railways represents the biggest change in the way we run the railways since privatisation 30 years ago. We must keep and improve what clearly works, and we must not weaken or undermine key roles, such as that of the rail regulator, so that we can make GBR fit for purpose, alongside open access, and deliver the best services for passengers across the country.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): My hon. Friend is speaking very well about the usefulness and benefit of having a good rail system. He will be aware of the new timetable that the national rail operators are proposing. For my constituency, Berwick-upon-Tweed is the most important station, although it is in England. It will be losing services to London, and the journey time will be increased to allow greater capacity for links to Edinburgh and Newcastle. Does he agree that we need to ensure that small towns across the UK do not lose rail connectivity for the benefit of larger hubs?

Martin Vickers: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is one of the key arguments in favour of introducing more open access operators, which have widened the number of destinations served.

If we drill into the latest passenger and financial figures, we see that there is a key lesson for those who are designing and planning GBR. We can all agree that we need better trains serving more places, with more reliability and competitive fares. But there is a huge caveat. This hinges on Ministers choosing to copy the east coast operating model, which, as I mentioned, has proven such a success; there are evidence-based statistics to show that. The Chancellor and the new Transport Secretary must take note of that model if they want to avoid a future of soaring subsidies and flatlining passenger numbers. It should now be encouraged and rolled out across Britain's railway network, including, of course, northern Lincolnshire. Office of Rail and Road statistics show that where inter-city trains do not compete for

[*Martin Vickers*]

passengers, services are expensive, require big subsidies, have struggled to get their finances and passengers back since covid, and endure poor passenger satisfaction. Importantly, the east coast main line has seen the fastest post-pandemic recovery on the network, enjoys the highest passenger satisfaction as LNER's subsidy continues to fall, and could soon be subsidy-free.

The Minister will know personally about the benefits of open access competition, because Grand Central connects Wakefield with London, in competition with LNER. Those services provide valuable choice and competition for his constituents, who can choose between operators when they travel. The services also help to deliver inward investment, growth and regeneration, as direct rail services are invaluable when investors look at locations outside London.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): We all agree that better choice and more services—in particular, direct services—are an objective that we all want. Unfortunately, in Keighley, we do not have any open access provision at the moment. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we achieved a direct link between Skipton and London or Ilkley and London, with more opportunities through open access, it would not only be better for the commuter, but deliver better economic growth in my constituency and lead to cheaper rail prices for commuters in my constituency?

Martin Vickers: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point and highlights yet another group of provincial towns that would see benefits for their local economy and for leisure.

I hope that open access rail policy features among the Chancellor's new tests on how to deliver growth across the country. As a Yorkshire MP, the Minister will know of the clear benefits so far across the county—whether it be in Hull, Bradford, York, Doncaster or Selby—where open access has established and grown large rail markets. The new evidence shows that rail competition delivers not just growth on a significant scale, but a critical competitive discipline whereby all passengers enjoy choice and more routes. In 2016, the Competition and Markets Authority produced a 200-page report on passenger train competition and reached that very conclusion. I would not normally urge the Government to look to Europe for good practice, but Italy and Austria are two countries where the benefits of open access can be clearly seen.

Replicating the east coast model could help to prevent any risk of GBR sliding into financial and sector decline, which should be a huge concern for the Treasury. Crucially, open access is also a key component for British train building. Just before Christmas, the Prime Minister welcomed a significant £500 million investment in new train build at Hitachi's Newton Aycliffe plant, but it is important to consider that that private sector order was for new trains to serve existing and new open access routes. An option on a follow-up order worth a further £500 million depends, I understand, on more open access routes being awarded by the regulator.

Melanie Onn: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous with his time, and I am pleased that he has mentioned the Italian rail system. Obviously, Italy is

very similar to Grimsby, and we would certainly benefit from the kind of rail system that operates in Italy, which is very smooth and good value for customers. Italy has good stock as well.

If we are to achieve a direct rail service from Cleethorpes to King's Cross, for which the hon. Gentleman has campaigned for many years, open access operators need quick decision making in order to be able to place their stock orders with manufacturers to make sure that they can get services up and running for passengers quickly. Does he agree that the Minister should look very closely at these things and make decisions as quickly as he can?

Martin Vickers: I agree that Italy and Grimsby are very similar. I will come to the hon. Lady's point about the speed of the regulator's decision making, which is absolutely crucial.

In addition to my desire and ambition for direct services to my constituency, it is vital that the significance of open access is fully acknowledged, and that nothing is done to weaken or undermine it. Why would the Government not want more unsubsidised, direct and fast rail connections across the country? Why would they not want to secure hundreds of millions of pounds of investment in forward orders for new trains to be built in Britain? Why would they not want GBR to face robust and innovative competition on key routes, which would inevitably see standards rise, and fares and subsidies decline?

Passengers in York, Hull, Wakefield, Bradford, Doncaster, Sunderland, Newcastle and Edinburgh all now enjoy up to three competing high-speed train services to London, where open access services compete with Government-run LNER. A plan to introduce a new and fast open access service to connect Sheffield and Worksop with King's Cross is awaiting the green light, as is one to connect Rochdale with London Euston, and one to connect Cardiff with Edinburgh. Hopefully, the plans will be swiftly approved so that passengers can enjoy more direct fast trains and real fare competition, and they will all help those cities' respective leaders to make their case for inward investment. Sheffield has not enjoyed a direct service to King's Cross since 1968, and a new service would rival the existing East Midlands service between the city and London St Pancras.

In debates and at Transport questions, we frequently hear tales of woe about Avanti and the services that it offers travellers on the west coast main line. That could change if we took the east coast main line as a model, and I urge Ministers to get on with it. New economic analysis from Arup shows what can be achieved. Hull Trains' open access service, which connects Beverley, Hull, Selby and Doncaster with London, has delivered between £185 million and £380 million in extra local benefits since it was approved by Tony Blair's Government in 2000, and those figures are expected to grow to between £325 million and £700 million by 2032. Prior to Hull Trains' operations, there was just one direct daily train in each direction between London and Hull. Similarly, the Blair Government oversaw the approval of new and fast Grand Central services to the north-east and Yorkshire in the mid and late 2000s.

On average, Hull Trains' fares are 30% cheaper than those for traditional services. As I said when I met representatives of Hull Trains a couple of weeks ago, they could do for the south bank of the Humber what

they have done for the north bank. Direct rail links have boosted inward investment and done more for levelling up and regeneration than a host of Whitehall schemes. There are also significant environmental benefits, as more people abandon the car and coach, and instead use the well-priced high-speed trains. The popular and fast Lumo open access service between London, Newcastle and Edinburgh continues to eat into the aviation market and delivers a crucial modal shift from air to rail.

I welcome the fact that many colleagues wish to speak in this debate, and I make the point that the Office of Rail and Road has recently approved new long-distance open access services up to Stirling on the west coast main line, and between London Paddington and south Wales on the Great Western line. The Go-op application to run new open access services between Weston-super-Mare, Taunton and Swindon has also been approved. We need to speed up track access applications for operators, as the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) said, because they can take up to five years. That is another example of where the Government could boost their growth agenda. The last thing that is needed is more barriers to open access. Let us speed up the process and get Britain moving.

A recent survey conducted by Virgin showed that around two thirds of all passengers welcomed competition between train operators on price and quality. That is encouraging, and it shows how an independent regulator can deliver good decisions in the national interest. A key question for the Minister will be: is more open access to be encouraged and approved, and will an independent regulator retain powers over this critical area after GBR is established? If decisions on open access are subsumed into GBR and taken off the regulator, many of us will be concerned that the hand of civil servants and other rail planners who have been proven wrong in the past in their opposition to open access will stifle and weaken this valuable part of the railway sector. If GBR is to be genuinely at arm's length of Whitehall, as Ministers pledge, the future of the regulator and open access will be a key test.

I look forward to Ministers' working with me and colleagues across the House to encourage and deliver new open access inter-city services to northern Lincolnshire and destinations across the country.

1.46 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) on securing this important debate on open access operators.

Rail transport in the north has suffered long-term neglect, with new plans left to gather dust. From George Osborne's northern powerhouse speech in 2014 onwards, they have essentially been an unfunded wish list passed from one Government to the other. But under our new Government we have Great British Railways on the table, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister about how we will incorporate open access operators into our plans, because the north-south divide is real.

Total Treasury spending on rail in Yorkshire and the Humber last year was £1.25 billion, compared with £9.3 billion for London and £3.1 billion for the south-east. The current funding structure for transforming regional transport also makes it very difficult for areas such as

the one that I represent in Scarborough and Whitby, incorporated into the York and North Yorkshire combined authority, to address the desperate lack of connectivity that exists. The main funding scheme that the Government inherited is the city region sustainable transport funding settlement, but combined authorities like ours do not qualify as they are not a city region. That funding gap has left York and North Yorkshire struggling to even plan a transport strategy. I hope that the Government will address that in the spending review.

Open access operators could step in to help. Coastal communities such as Scarborough have suffered for too long from poor rail services, and that has had a major impact on our economies. I have been campaigning for a half-hourly service between Scarborough and York, which would be taken for granted in other areas, but it seems an impossibility. The line was opened in July 1845. It took just one year and three days to complete the 45-mile route, but TransPennine Express, which now runs services on the line, today appears to have little of that urgency about it.

Scarborough is, of course, our first coastal seaside resort and is beautiful. We also have the North York Moors national park on our doorstep. The growth of staycations and holidays means there is real potential for visitors, as well as for the residents who are crying out for a better service. With the creation of Great British Railways, we have the chance to have one body responsible for the strategic direction of our railways, ensuring, as the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham said, that infrastructure and services work together and drive regional growth. I urge the Government to look at open access operators, because although they currently account for only 0.6% of total passenger journeys, they have massive potential to open up new routes, such as the Scarborough to London via York route. Look at the success of Hull Trains: in 1999 there was only one train a day between Hull and London, and now there are seven each weekday and six at weekends. As the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham said, new direct services are being approved and opened all the time.

I appreciate that there is a question whether open access services put extra pressure on network capacity and I look forward to the Minister's response. However, unless we look at how we serve coastal communities such as mine, given the poor connections we will not move forward. If any operators are listening, I would love to see a direct service between Scarborough and London.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The hon. Member is making a really important point about coastal communities. Rural communities find themselves in a similar situation, where they may have lost a direct service. Wrexham, Shropshire and Midlands Railway has an excellent plan to run a direct-to-London service through Wrexham, Shropshire and the Midlands but it is taking an inordinately long amount of time for it to get through the Office of Rail and Road. Does the hon. Member agree that we need not just keen operators but to process their applications quickly, to give the people the service they deserve?

Alison Hume: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. She makes an important point about time. Time is of the essence as we strive to deliver better

[*Alison Hume*]

rail services. Perhaps we need a little of the spirit of the 19th century's rail pioneers to fully connect coastal communities at last.

1.51 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I thank my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers), for securing this important debate and for emphasising the national importance of open access. His point about Hull Trains and the opportunity it has given us is very powerful. I want to speak about our little local problem, to which he and the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) alluded.

Originally, there were two trains every day going up and down to London via Lincoln and Market Rasen, ending up in Grimsby. That was then cut to one train and we were given a solemn promise that that train would never be taken away, but decades ago it was taken away. I have been campaigning for decades to get that service up and running again. We are talking about a catchment area of a quarter of a million people with no direct train to London. I cannot think of any other country in Europe that would have such a situation for huge conurbations like Grimsby and Cleethorpes and a place like Market Rasen—which is a small station but serves a vast rural area, perhaps 20 miles in every direction, going all the way to Louth. Yet every time we have been to see Ministers with campaigns, over many years, we get fobbed off with every single excuse. I cannot count the number of times we went to see the Transport Minister in the last Government; now I am boring this Minister instead, but I will go on boring him and we will go on making this point.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham said, we were first fobbed off with the view that there was no capacity on the main line. Yet the Azuma train runs perfectly well to Lincoln and it would make no difference to capacity on the main line if that train carried on to Grimsby via Market Rasen, so that point does not hold. We made some progress eventually and I thought that we finally had a commitment that this train would happen. Indeed, we had a test run in June 2023. I was there—I saw it. Everything worked perfectly smoothly. The train arrived from Grimsby, there was no problem, we had our photograph taken, everybody was very happy, but we have still had no progress.

Now we have had this bolt from the blue: it is no longer the capacity point, but apparently we cannot have this train because the platform in Market Rasen is too short and there is no bridge. That is an absurd point. I go all over the country and I see trains stop at short platforms, and they announce, “Will you please go to the first four carriages because it’s a short platform?”

Then we got the excuse that if the Azuma train stopped at Market Rasen, it would somehow cover the pedestrian crossing, which is apparently unacceptable. Is somebody going to try to go across the railway line and climb underneath the train to get to it, stopped at the platform? It is ridiculous. I am not sure that it is even possible to climb underneath a train. Are people going to sprint down the track, leaving the platform altogether, to get round the back of the train? This is all just ludicrous. There is absolutely no reason why the

train could not stop there, blocking the existing pedestrian access. Perhaps once in 100 years there might be some sort of injury; in fact I doubt whether there would ever be any injury. So, why are we stopping the whole service because, apparently, the existing pedestrian access could be blocked?

It is funny—the operators never give an explanation. They say, “Oh, we now have a problem with the disabled access and it must be in a certain part of the train.” But surely there are solutions. This is a sort of not-can-do attitude, which is driving the country crazy.

Whenever we write to bodies such as Network Rail, instead of their having the attitude of, “Let’s work together, let’s make this work,” once again we get fobbed off with ridiculous excuses and they never actually explain their actions. Then they say, “We have got to build a bridge.” All right, they build a bridge. Then they have come up with a ridiculous figure of £24 million. How could it cost £24 million to build a bridge? This is only a small country station with just one footbridge. My hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham campaigned for years for a bridge, did he not? And he got it for far less—£1 million, was it not?

Martin Vickers: My right hon. Friend will remember from the last Parliament that I campaigned for a footbridge over Suggitts Lane in Cleethorpes. Thankfully, I was supported by the then Prime Minister—Boris Johnson—who on one famous occasion at Prime Minister’s questions said:

“Suggitt’s Lane is never far from my thoughts”. —[*Official Report*, 23 October 2019; Vol. 666, c. 963.]

I hope that the Market Rasen situation will not be far from the Minister’s thoughts.

Sir Edward Leigh: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. This is a serious issue. There is absolutely no reason why the great conurbation of Grimsby and Cleethorpes should not have a direct train to London, and there is no reason why the good people who live in the rural areas around Market Rasen should not have a direct train.

What has actually happened—one might argue that this is not really LNER’s fault—is that since we have had the Azuma train going directly from London to Lincoln, our indirect service has got worse. There are more delays and there is a reduced service. It really is hard work to get from that part of my constituency to London.

So, enough of excuses. We had a tremendous relationship with the Transport Minister in the last Government and we look forward to our relationship with this Minister in this Government. There is nothing party political about this matter. What we are doing—the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes, my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham and I—is begging the Minister to please intervene to knock some heads together to get this train going and stopping. That is all we ask.

1.57 pm

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): It is an honour to speak in this debate under your chairmanship, Mrs Lewell-Buck.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) on securing this Backbench Business debate and I thank our colleagues on the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. Along with other colleagues here in Westminster Hall today, the hon. Gentleman has made such a good case for increasing open access services to his constituency and beyond.

In my contribution today, I will celebrate the successes of an open access agreement that benefits my constituents in Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend. So, I am showing off a bit, but I make no excuse for doing so. First, however, I reaffirm my support for the Government's legislative action on public ownership since taking office. I supported the overhaul of our broken rail system in the voting Lobby and I still support it today.

Open access was left out of the scope of the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Act 2024. It is worth noting that in the year 2022-23, domestic open access passenger services accounted for only 0.6% of passenger journeys and 2.4% of passenger operator revenues. Throughout the legislative process, Ministers advised that they saw a continuing role for such arrangements where they add value and capacity to the network and, during a statement on railway performance in November, the previous Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh), cited FirstGroup's Lumo as a successful example.

The Lumo service runs between Edinburgh and London via Newcastle. Of course, Members know that most trains running to and from King's Cross on the east coast main line are operated by LNER. However, Arup estimates that at least £480 million of economic benefits have been realised since FirstGroup's Lumo launched in 2021. Lumo has built capacity as a complementary service on a core route in the UK, running five services a day. It has given my constituents additional choice by increasing the number of trains to the capital, for instance adding a new option for travellers between Newcastle and London to leave before 6 am and arrive in London at about 8.30 am.

Open access arrangements, if done properly, should drive up the number of journeys on our rail and not abstract value from existing services. According to FirstGroup, Lumo has helped to generate 6.2 million additional journeys, with 3.9 million of those taking place on Lumo services. Overall usage of the east coast main line rose by 18% in the 12 months to September last year compared with the year 2018-19, including an 11% growth in the usage of LNER services.

Modal shift will play a critical role in our journey to net zero. Decarbonising the grid, which this Labour Government have taken firm action on, is a sizeable part of that journey. Encouraging behavioural change in the transport sector represents some of the other hard yards that we must cover.

I support the Secretary of State's ambition to ensure the benefits provided by open access operators outweigh the impact they have on taxpayers, and to ensure the ability to operate the network efficiently. I have sought today to advocate for a successful example of open access, which has benefited my constituents and the broader region.

On that broader region, I thank FirstGroup for the investment of £500 million into new British-built trains by Hitachi at Newton Aycliffe and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and

Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) on his part in securing that successful investment. I hope FirstGroup can gain approval from the regulator to serve more destinations, as that would lead to a £460 million follow-on order for new trains.

The most efficient use of our east coast main line is deeply important for me and all other north-east Members of Parliament. Growth and productivity in the north-east of England have been held back by our infrastructure. In closing, therefore, I seize this opportunity to lobby the Minister for the reopening of the Leamside line, which would be a game changer for the north-east, freeing up capacity for more LNER and Lumo trains to operate on our busy east coast main line.

2.2 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I thank the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) for securing this debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. We have heard lively contributions from across the House, and underlying all of them is a simple truth: in the UK, open access rail operators have a clear track record of improving services, increasing access and driving economic growth.

However, the recent letter from the Secretary of State to the Office of Rail and Road makes it very clear that the future of open access services in this country is at risk. Although the Government's position is just one of the issues that the ORR has a statutory duty to consider, the fact that the Government are asking the ORR to take a more cautious approach is clearly a concern. I would be grateful to hear the Minister's views on that point and any assurances that he can give.

Although the Secretary of State might have legitimate concerns regarding capacity and abstraction, I fear there is an ideological element to her intervention. The Government are in danger of being led by doctrine rather than facts. Again, an assurance would be gratefully received.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham, the record of three open access operators—Lumo, Grand Central and Hull Trains—competing against the Government-owned franchise LNER on the east coast main line has shown how competition for passengers drives down fares and drives up passenger numbers. Research has shown new open access operators competing on the same routes as incumbents typically offer fare reductions of 20% to 60% in the long term.

At a time when fares are sky high, competition helping to drive down costs for passengers should be encouraged, particularly when it is compensated for by a commensurate increase in passenger numbers to more than cover the revenue lost per customer. On the east coast main line, passenger numbers bounced back faster than in any other area after covid, due in no small part to the competition on that part of the network.

Open access is not only good for passengers, but good for the planet. Cheaper tickets and better access to services, since Lumo has been running services from London to Edinburgh, have meant that rail's market share, compared with air travel, grew from 35% in 2019 to 57% in 2022.

That is not just a UK phenomenon. Unlike the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham, I am delighted to look to Europe for inspiration. In Italy, competition

[Mr Paul Kohler]

between the open access operator Italo Treno and the Italian state operator has driven a 90% increase in passenger numbers between Rome and Milan, while in Spain competition between Ouigo and Iryo on the Madrid-to-Valencia route has resulted in fares 50% lower than on routes with no competition. It is somewhat ironic that, while Europe is liberalising its railways and seeing positive results, we are potentially moving in the opposite direction.

Open access rail can also play a vital part in increasing services to many of our other underserved communities. As we have heard from the hon. Members for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) and for Brigg and Immingham about Cleethorpes, from the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) about Skipton, and from the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) about Scarborough, there are many towns and regions in this country where open access can make a real contribution to improving connectivity across the country. With an eye to revenue, private companies have found gaps in the timetable and delivered for residents where the Government have not.

As we have seen in this debate, any changes to open access arrangements by the Government are likely to provoke ire from their Back Bench colleagues in Hull, Sunderland and elsewhere. The hon. Members for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon), for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes, and for Scarborough and Whitby know the value of open access, and I am sure they will keep the Minister's mind concentrated on its importance.

The same will be true of MPs representing areas where open access is still in its infancy or gestation. In Somerset and Wiltshire, concerned residents are taking the lack of rail provision into their own hands, with the formation of Go-op, the first ever co-operatively owned railway operator, which plans to increase vital regional services in an often neglected area. Meanwhile, in north Wales, the proposed Wrexham, Shropshire & Midlands Railway will bring back direct services from London to Wrexham, helping to bring passengers and further growth to a town already on the up—although, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) noted, it has taken far too long to get through the bureaucracy and get the service approved.

While we will hear from the Minister about concerns regarding capacity on the network, there are definitely areas with capacity for a greater number of services. Take the channel tunnel, for example: the French owners of the tunnel, Getlink, have said that it was designed for double the capacity, and an application for a new open access operator on the line to compete with Eurostar is with the regulator. Introducing welcome competition on the line will help to grow international train services to and from the UK and to reduce ticket prices.

It is clear, therefore, that open access should have a part to play in the future of the rail network. While my party and I are agnostic regarding rail nationalisation, the Liberal Democrats firmly believe that the private sector should play a part where there are clear benefits for passengers. We should be led by evidence, which shows that open access operators have made a positive addition to the network, and that the regulator has been successful in addressing concerns about abstraction.

The Government, in their upcoming Rail Reform Bill, must therefore ensure that a fully functioning, properly resourced regulator is maintained.

As we move to a model where 75% of rail activity is under public ownership, we must ensure that that near-monopoly does not crowd out others, such as freight and open access. Not only is maintaining a competitive element on the railway good for passengers, but it will help the Government to guarantee that GBR is delivering the best outcomes, and—of course—grow the economy.

2.9 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Lewell-Buck, especially because it is my first speech from the Front Bench. I am told that you never forget your first time, but I do hope the Minister is gentle on me.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) for securing this debate. He has been a strong advocate for open access rail services, and I welcome his contributions today. He rightly highlights the importance of these services to regions across the country. I am told that in 2013 he was among a group of MPs who wrote to the Office of Rail and Road in support of expanding long-distance open access services. While I think we would all agree that more progress would have been welcome, it remains vital that Members like my hon. Friend across the House ensure that regulators are doing everything they can to encourage competition.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of open access intercity train competition on the east coast main line, connecting London, the north-east and Scotland. The benefits are clear: lower fares, more choices, more routes, increased innovation and higher passenger satisfaction. This proven model should be used as a blueprint in shaping Great British Railways and the upcoming railways Bill. It remains frustrating that, despite its success, the model has not been replicated on other intercity main lines.

As a Conservative, I value competition. When opportunities arise to introduce it into our transportation systems, we should take them. The evidence is clear: open access services create new travel opportunities, especially for underserved or more rural communities, such as my Farnham and Bordon constituency. These services support economic growth and encourage a shift to greener transport. That is why it is encouraging that new services were approved in 2024, including two entirely new routes on the west coast main line and the great western main line, along with eight approvals for smaller-scale improvements.

Recently, the Prime Minister and the Transport Secretary visited the Hitachi factory in Newton Aycliffe to celebrate FirstGroup's £500 million order for 14 new Class 80X units, which will be a key part of their open access plans. Those units will operate on Lumo's east coast main line services, as passionately described by the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon), and on the newly secured London Paddington to Carmarthen service, launching in December 2027. Crucially, the expansion of services means more British train orders, boosting domestic industry. I urge the Minister and his Department to continue supporting further applications to sustain that investment.

A regulatory framework that supports the sector's investing in UK-built rolling stock and improving passenger services ultimately benefits both fare-paying passengers

and the wider economy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) mentioned. The Government must ensure that they facilitate services that serve the public interest. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), I will also focus on a couple of local issues—he has said that he bores on, but if anyone has the right to bore on, it is the Father of the House, and long may he continue to do so.

Southwestern Railway has been chosen as the first service to be nationalised this year, but the Government remain unclear about the impact that will have on open access services. My constituents in Farnham and Bordon rely on regular and reliable trains from Farnham, Liphook, and Haslemere stations to commute into London. As it stands, those services are frequently disrupted by strike action from the Labour party's largest donors. While the fate of Southwestern Railway may be sealed, the potential Guildford to Heathrow terminal five connection, which would greatly benefit my constituents travelling to the airport, is under threat if open access services are restricted. I hope the Minister can reassure my constituents that nationalisation will not stifle open access operators, which play an important part in filling gaps in the delivery of rail services.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham said, the Minister's own Wakefield constituency benefits from popular open access intercity services, which have led to lower fares, greater choice, and better connectivity with London and the wider region. Furthermore, the open access operator at Wakefield has invested in station facilities. Despite that, the Government's overall approach to rail has marched towards centralisation and nationalisation. While the merits of that direction are a debate for another time, it is worth noting that the Government, both before and after the election, have recognised the value of open access services. The key question is whether that recognition will translate into tangible support for expansion.

In September 2024, the former Transport Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh) clearly stated in a written statement to the House:

“Open access operators have a proven track record in driving competition and better passenger outcomes, and where there is a case that open access operators can add value and capacity to the network, they will be able to.”

Does that position still hold with the new Secretary of State and her Ministers? A clear reaffirmation would provide much-needed confidence to the businesses ready to invest.

Open access operators not only add financial value but improve accessibility and convenience. In my own constituency, there is a strong case for reopening the Bordon line and the station, or at least for a rail-bus link from Bordon to Liphook to enhance connectivity and increase train usage. We should remain open to innovative transport solutions that improve infrastructure just as we do with open access. However, despite positive statements in the past, the Secretary of State's letter to the ORR in January raised concerns, signalling a shift in tone from the earlier commitments. Furthermore, some troubling rhetoric has emerged.

Last year, a rail union leader described open access firms as parasitical during testimony to the Transport Committee. The RMT has also explicitly campaigned for Great British Railways to absorb open access operations

and rail freight. The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume), in her usual BAFTA-nominated style, referred to the spirit of the 17th century, but the danger with these unions is that they will take us back to the 1970s, and I am sure none of us wants to go there. Given the Government's previous concessions to the rail unions, it is fair to question whether open access services could be curtailed in future negotiations. Can the Minister assure us that these services will not be sacrificed in such discussions?

Another concern is that while the UK seems to be moving towards greater state control, as has been mentioned, Europe is heading in the opposite direction, embracing private sector involvement in rail. A European Commission report published in September last year highlighted that open access competition led to a 31% reduction in ticket prices in Italy and a 41% increase in service frequency in Austria. The report's conclusion was clear that open access competition,

“across a variety of different cases, both decreased ticket prices and improved the quality of the service as compared to the situation prior to the start of competition.”

The Government have now raised concerns about the impact of open access on overall rail revenue, as we heard mention of today. However, the ORR has conducted thorough cost-benefit analyses, including cost consultations, on the monetised impacts. If the new Secretary of State is questioning these findings, is it because the Government believe that the ORR has made errors in awarding the contracts, or is this part of a broader policy shift?

The future and independence of the regulator is critical. Under plans for Great British Railways, will the ORR retain its authority over open access applications? Any move to transfer these decisions to Great British Railways or to the Department would undermine transparency, accountability, and independence, and the Opposition would strongly oppose such a change. The Government's position, I am afraid, remains unclear. Are they a genuine supporter of open access operators, or do they merely tolerate them as a costly inconvenience? We need clarity.

With the ORR currently considering 13 applications, can the Minister confirm whether new guidance is forthcoming? More importantly, can he reassure the sector that any new guidance will not obstruct the growth of successful rail businesses that offer more choice and lower fares for passengers? The Government face a choice: embrace the benefits of competition and build on a proven success story, or retreat into centralisation at the expense of passengers. I urge Ministers to choose the former.

2.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): It is an absolute pleasure to see a fellow sand dancer in the Chair today, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) on securing this debate on open access—a matter of importance to many in this House and their constituents. I also welcome the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) to his place on the Opposition Front Bench. I look forward to our sparring in future debates.

Open access can open up new markets. We only need to look at Hull Trains, where the private sector identified opportunities that the Government had missed, to see

[Simon Lightwood]

how open access can benefit passengers and grow the market. However, it is also true that parts of our rail network are growing increasingly congested and, although open access operators can generate new income from the network, they can also abstract revenue from existing operators, including those funded by the taxpayer. We therefore need to ensure that there is a balance when we consider new open access applications. The Secretary of State was clear about that when she wrote to the Office of Rail and Road on 6 January.

Some Members have raised concerns over the Secretary of State's letter, so let me be clear: the letter did not signal that the door had been closed on open access. Indeed, the letter makes it clear that there remains a role for open access, but new applications will have to demonstrate that their benefits are sufficient to justify any money they abstract from Government-funded services or the negative impact that they could have on publicly funded infrastructure projects. They must also demonstrate that they will not damage performance by increasing the complexity of the running of the network. I am aware also that the Secretary of State's letter caused some concern with freight operators, so let me again be clear that the letter related only to passenger open access.

The benefits of open access to passengers on the east coast main line have been highlighted by hon. Members. I have already mentioned Hull Trains, but it would be remiss of me not to mention both Grand Central and Lumo, which also run on the east coast main line. Both those operators have increased choice for passengers. For example, Lumo now offers choice between short-haul flights and rail with its fast services between London and Edinburgh.

Open access services will increase choice and provide benefits for passengers on other parts of the network. Services have already been approved to operate from London to Stirling on the west coast main line from later in 2025, and between London and Carmarthen from 2027. We are also aware of, and considering, a range of new applications that have been submitted by open access operators. These include proposals on the east coast main line and also more broadly across the country, including on the west coast main line. Whether these applications are successful is currently a matter for the Office of Rail and Road in its role as an independent regulator. Alongside a range of other stakeholders, the Department will provide views. The Office of Rail and Road will consider them alongside its statutory duties and will make decisions in due course.

Both open access operators and the operators contracted by the Department deliver services to passengers, but there are key differences. Open access operators are not bound by public service obligations. Whereas an operator delivering services for the Department will be required to serve all stations on a particular route, an open access operator can choose which stations to serve. For that reason, it is not possible to simply replace the Department's operators with open access operators. Were we to try to do so, we would risk depriving certain communities of any rail service at all.

Although constrained to a degree by the availability and capacity on the network, the lack of public service obligations means that open access operators can design their timetables to maximise commercial opportunities. That means that open access operators can choose within

wider operational constraints what time they wish to run their trains and at which stations their trains will stop. That freedom means that they can be more challenging for Network Rail in setting the timetable. We have seen delays in agreeing the timetable for the east coast main line precisely because there were so many competing demands, including open access operations.

It is not just timetabling that is more complex. When Network Rail wants to undertake engineering works, it needs to ensure that the views of all operators are factored in. Obviously, where there are multiple operators with different operating models—for example, there are those with a greater focus on weekend and leisure travel rather than commuting—Network Rail will find it harder to keep everybody happy. That can reduce efficiency and increase journey costs, as Network Rail may have to close the network over a number of weekends and nights, rather than for a single block, to ensure that all operators are treated fairly.

I have talked about possible operational challenges. I want to be clear: we expect, as does the regulator, that Network Rail will make all efforts to manage the network in the most efficient manner and in a way that will accommodate the optimum number of Government-funded services. Although open access operators can drive new revenue to Government-funded services, they can also abstract revenue. The Office of Rail and Road recognises this through its “not primarily abstractive” test. The test is not binary and failing it does not mean that open access operators will not get access to the network, but it does highlight the potential impact on the taxpayer.

We have a responsibility to the taxpayer to move the railways on to a financially sustainable footing. Therefore, if we see applications that will abstract a significant amount from the Government's operators, we need to carefully consider whether, when providing the Government's view, we can support the application. Where there are wider socioeconomic benefits that arise from open access applications, we will, when we provide our views to the Office of Rail and Road, balance these against the abstraction, but we have to be honest about the financial pressures the railways face and factor them into our considerations.

I appreciate that I have just talked at length about the challenges that open access can create as well as the benefits it can bring. I highlight the challenges not to say that open access is bad—there can be real benefits—but as a Government, we need to be mindful of the full implications of each new open access application.

People have said that the move to public ownership means that the Government will seek to take open access off the network. I can categorically say that we have no intention to remove open access operators from the network. We were clear during the passage of the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Act 2024 that it only applied to operators contracted by the Government. I know that there has been speculation that we would look to bring open access operators into public ownership when their existing rights expire. Again, I reiterate that that is not our intention. Regarding our future plans for access to the network, we intend to bring forward a consultation on our proposed railways Bill shortly. That will provide Members with the opportunity to review, consider and respond to our proposals. I cannot pre-empt the consultation, and ask for Members' understanding in this matter.

I will now address some of the specific issues raised by Members today. We have talked about the complexity of timetable challenges. Obviously, open access can and does make that a little bit more complex and challenging at times. Regarding passenger growth on the east coast main line, although open access operators have opened up markets on that line, they are by no means the sole reason for passenger growth. The Department has invested heavily in infrastructure, leading to improvements in resilience and reliability, and has taken the lead on fare trials on LNER to simplify the passenger offer. Underpinning all that is the fact that demand was already present on the east coast main line, even before the intervention of either Government or open access operators. On charges, open access operators pay variable access charges, but do not fully cover the costs of fixed-track access charges towards long-term maintenance of the network.

International comparisons were raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn). Although there are examples of open access competing with state-backed operators to offer choice to passengers in Europe, it needs to be noted that there are many differences between the British network and the rail networks in other countries. That makes it really difficult to make direct comparisons. For example, some countries operate completely separate rail networks for inner city and local services, creating a totally different environment for comparison than that here in Britain.

In terms of additional services in her constituency, my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) talked about the potential for open access to step in. We are clear that where there are gaps and it can be accommodated, we will consider that positively. GBR will look at the entire network to ensure it is used as fully as possible.

I am sure the Rail Minister will have heard the message from my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glendon) on the Leamside line. If not, I will make sure that I mention it to him. I thank her for her enthusiasm for public ownership and GBR. GBR will ensure the highest level of customer standards and operational performance as a directing mind for our railways. It will have a relentless focus on delivering for our passengers and, crucially, for freight as well.

Some Members raised, quite rightly, the speed at which the ORR is making decisions. We recognise that it can take too long for decisions to be made by the ORR, and we are working with operators, including open access and Network Rail, and the regulator to improve that. I believe it was the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward

Leigh), who raised new services for Cleethorpes and Grimsby. We are working with industry to understand the timetabling, financial, operational and infrastructure issues that need to be resolved. I recognise the frustration, but we are actively considering what can be done.

Open access plays an important role on the network and it will continue to play an important role on the network. We look forward to considering and providing our views on new applications and to our continued work with open access operators. However, we must and will balance the benefits of new applications with the impacts that they have on both the taxpayer and the operational efficiency of the network, in line with the letter that the Secretary of State sent to the regulator. I am incredibly grateful to all hon. Members here for their contributions. They have given us further food for thought and a useful insight into the benefits of open access to their constituents.

2.30 pm

Martin Vickers: I thank all the hon. Members who have taken part in what has been a very worthwhile debate. This is the shadow Minister's first time on the Front Bench, and I am sure he will go far. I emphasise that the demand for a direct service to Grimsby and Cleethorpes also has widespread support in the business sector. The Hull and Humber chamber of commerce did a survey some time ago and there is overwhelming interest.

The Minister mentioned the problems with abstraction from the main operator, and that was one of the reasons the Grand Central Rail application was turned down eight to 10 years ago. He talked about the impact on the taxpayer of the subsidy, but with LNER the subsidy is going down at the same time that there is greater competition, so I urge him to bear that in mind. It is, as I say, an easy win for the Government's economic growth strategy.

I thank everyone for their presence. I will now rush off to King's Cross to catch the train, but unfortunately I will have to change at Doncaster. The one advantage of changing at Doncaster—a station I know very well—is that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) and I often exchange interesting gossip about life at Westminster there.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered open access operators for rail services.

2.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

Low-income Countries: Debt Cancellation

[ESTHER McVEY *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered debt cancellation for low-income countries.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the momentous Jubilee 2000 debt campaign brought together people from all walks of life, trade unions, churches, community groups, and even the odd rock star and celebrity, with the sole purpose of demanding debt relief for the world's poorest countries, which are suffering extreme poverty caused by debt payments. The campaign was a resounding success and resulted in more than \$130 billion of debt cancellation for 36 low-income countries, equating to an average 75% debt reduction for each country, allowing them to invest in health, education systems and other public services.

Although the Jubilee 2000 campaign was widely celebrated, and world leaders felt that some good had been achieved, it later became clear that the symptom had been dealt with but not the cause. The current state of affairs is alarming. The World Bank's latest international debt report stated that developing countries spent a record \$1.4 trillion to service foreign debts, and that interest payments alone have soared by nearly a third to \$406 billion, leaving many developing countries having to cut vital services, such as health, education and environmental programmes. The pressures are felt most greatly by the poorest and most vulnerable countries, which paid a record \$96.2 billion to service their debt in 2023. Of that, \$34.6 billion was in interest alone—a staggering fourfold increase on the figure a decade ago. Indermit Gill, the World Bank Group's chief economist, said:

“In highly indebted poor countries, multilateral development banks are now acting as a lender of last resort, a role they were not designed to serve. That reflects a dysfunctional financing system”.

According to a report on the global debt crisis published recently by the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, 3.3 billion people now live in countries that spend more on debt servicing than on health and education, and the most food-insecure countries have seen the highest increases. Debt servicing is expected to consume 55% of low-income countries' budgets in sub-Saharan Africa by 2025.

A definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result. When countries such as Ghana and Sri Lanka end up having to receive a 17th International Monetary Fund bail-out package, it is clear that things have to change.

A complicating factor in dealing with debt relief is the role of private creditors, which have exploded on to the international debt scene since the success of the Jubilee 2000 campaign. Today, 61% of global sovereign debt is owed to private creditors such as hedge funds, asset managers and investment banks. Private lenders' terms and conditions are often far more onerous than those of multilateral lenders, leaving low-income countries at the mercy of exorbitant interest rates and quick repayment schemes.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for the work he has done in this incredibly important area over a long time. He talks about the impact of rising interest rates on low-income countries, to which could be added the impact of covid and dealing with climate change, and the private sector operators. Does he agree that when countries such as the UK choose to forgive sovereign debt, speculators and private sector operators should not profit from that but should follow this country's lead?

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I will come to that later in my speech, but she is absolutely right. We need to treat private creditors in the same way we treat bilateral and multilateral creditors.

Private credit schemes are proving to be very lucrative deals for private creditors. In 2023 alone, private creditors received \$68 billion more in interest and repayments from low-income countries than they had actually lent to them. That in itself is bad enough; what is worse is that when a defaulting country seeks debt relief there is nothing to compel private creditors to agree to be bound by any agreement reached by multilateral and bilateral creditors. In fact, there is no obligation to compel them to act in good faith or at all.

One stark example is the case of Sri Lanka. In 2022, Sri Lanka defaulted on its sovereign debt, which led to the most serious economic crisis in the country's history. Sri Lanka sought debt relief from its creditors, with 47% of it owned by private creditors. Despite reaching an agreement with its bilateral creditors, the private creditors refused to accept any debt relief and sued Sri Lanka in the US courts to prioritise their debts. As a result, the private creditors will receive 30% more in debt repayments than the bilateral creditors, while Sri Lanka had to seek a bailout from the IMF. Sri Lanka will have to slash its public sector spending and spend 30% of its Government revenue on debt repayments, which the IMF regards as unsustainable. It is morally repugnant that private creditors behave in such a way, deliberately hampering the ability of a low-income country to get back on its feet at a time of crisis.

Sri Lanka is not alone in its experience at the hands of private lenders. Following the covid pandemic the G20, realising that international debt needed to be urgently dealt with, set up its common framework for debt treatments as the main global framework for dealing with resolving debt crises. The expectation was that all creditors would co-operate in collectively agreeing debt relief for countries that sought relief under the framework. Despite progress being made with bilateral and multilateral creditors, Chad and Zambia, which both sought debt relief under the framework, found that their private creditors would either drag negotiations out or offer debt relief that was significantly less than what was agreed with the bilateral or multilateral creditors.

Chad failed to get any debt relief from its main private creditor, the UK-based company Glencore, and Glencore will be repaid 50% more than Government creditors. Zambia had been negotiating a debt relief agreement for more than four years when it finally reached agreement with bondholders. One of the private companies was paid 13% more than Governments, including the UK, while other private lenders, including UK-based Standard Chartered and Investec, are still to agree debt relief with Zambia. Ethiopia and Ghana have experienced similar behaviour from private creditors.

The behaviour of private creditors is contrary to the spirit of the framework and has resulted in a loss of confidence in the framework's efficacy among other debtor countries. To date, only four countries have sought relief under the framework. The truth is that private creditors have no incentive to agree to debt relief, because if they hold out, they get the interest payments and principal repayments as agreed. If there is a default, they can sue in the UK or US courts for enforcement action against the defaulting country, which will also be lucrative for them.

For private creditors, it is a win-win situation; for low-income countries, it is lose-lose. Expecting private creditors to voluntarily enter into debt relief arrangements is like telling an alcoholic not to have a drink. Urgent legislation is required to compel private creditors to enter into and be bound by debt relief agreements.

I have talked a lot so far about sums of money, but we must remember the human cost of investment not going to low-income countries as a result of debt re-servicing—for example, the rise in infant mortality due to cuts in health spending. UNICEF has stated that if a country has defaulted on debt repayments that remain unresolved for more than three years, the infant mortality level rises by 11.4% over that same period. Chronic under-investment in education leads to a less skilled, less healthy and less productive workforce, resulting in a lost generation, making it harder for them to escape poverty.

So what needs to be done to resolve the debt crisis? In its excellent 2023 report entitled “Debt relief in low-income countries”, the International Development Committee came up with some recommendations. The first such measure would be the reform of the governance of financial institutions that control international debt, such as the IMF. The conditions imposed by the IMF on debt bail-outs often have dire effects and make things worse for the debtor country by placing more emphasis on the short-term repayment of debt, rather than on the long-term infrastructure development of a country that could provide it with lasting security and protection from indebtedness.

Secondly, there is a need to create a level playing field by passing legislation to compel private creditors to actively participate in the debt relief process by preventing them from suing for more money than they would get if they accepted debt relief on the same terms as other lenders. In 2010, the Labour Government passed the Debt Relief (Developing Countries) Act, which did exactly that for debt that was owed prior to 2004. My ten-minute rule Bill is an updated version of the 2010 Act. As more than 90% of bonds owed by countries eligible for debt relief are issued in the UK, it would have a significant impact on low-income countries and could be transformative in allowing money spent on servicing debt to go into health and education systems and to be spent on the environment. It would cost the Treasury nothing and, at a time when aid spending is seeing little if any increase, it would be a sure way of getting money to the most vulnerable countries. There is no justification for treating private creditors differently from other lenders.

Thirdly, there needs to be a public global debt register to record the details of all global sovereign debt. The need for transparency is urgent, and it would help populations in debtor countries to hold their Governments to account over entering agreements with predatory private creditors.

Fourthly, there should be a framework for the automatic cancellation of debt servicing when highly indebted countries are hit by catastrophic events such as climate-related disasters like Storm Beryl. It cannot be right that while a climate-vulnerable country is struggling to get back on its feet, it is forced to make debt-servicing payments. Instead of making these countries apply to international institutions for debt cancellation, debt cancellation should be automatic. Given that in 2024 the total external debt serviced by all African countries was \$104 billion, of which \$47 billion was owed to private creditors, and the entire UK aid budget to Africa was £993 million, something needs to change; otherwise we are just servicing the debt owed to private creditors.

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend for his generosity in giving way, as well as the excellent points he is making. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Africa, I have noted with concern the language around the increased migration that we have seen over the last few years, and we are all concerned to see the way in which criminal gangs exploit vulnerable migrants. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that by allowing the extraction of so much value from countries in Africa, we are not aiding and supporting economic opportunities for Africans in their own countries and are therefore contributing towards increased migration?

Bambos Charalambous: Again, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The lack of investment as a result of debt servicing leads to people seeking opportunities that are not available in their own country, so I totally agree with my hon. Friend on that point.

Before I conclude, I thank CAFOD, Christian Aid, Debt Justice, UNICEF and Save the Children for their excellent briefings ahead of this debate, and for their support in relation to debt cancellation. I conclude with these questions for the Minister. Will the Government support my ten-minute rule Bill to prevent private creditors from being able to sue for enforcement in the UK courts for more than has been agreed in relation to debt relief with bilateral and multilateral lenders? Does the Minister agree that there should be comparable treatment for all creditors? Also, do the Government support a public global debt register for transparency? Does the Minister support the reform of the governance of the institutions, such as the IMF, that set the terms and conditions of bail-outs?

The UK has a unique position in being able to use its global reputation to bring about change on the international stage in relation to debt cancellation, as it did 25 years ago. We led the way then, and it is time to do so again. We cannot afford not to. The global south is looking to us for action, and it is time for us to act.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called.

3.15 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship again, Ms McVey. I commend the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for leading the debate. I spoke to him beforehand, and he told me that he led a debate in this Chamber two weeks ago. I had the debate last Thursday, he has the debate this Thursday, and I

[Jim Shannon]

have the debate next Thursday in the same time slot—I think he and I are competing for the graveyard shift on a Thursday afternoon. I think that is two each. Maybe it will be exceeded—I am not sure—but well done to him, because this is a subject that we are all interested in, and that is why we are all here.

It is a pleasure to see the Minister in her place. I wish her well in her new role, and we look forward to her response on a matter that I know is close to her heart. I am confident that she will do her best to encourage us all. I also give my well wishes to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell). I suspect he is newly appointed—I hope I am right about that—and I wish him well in the role.

The United Kingdom has been involved in various initiatives aimed at providing debt relief to low-income countries over the years, including in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. We continue as a country to work alongside LICs to ease pressure, which is something we should be proud of. Many will know that we are known for our generosity to other countries. We will always do our best to support, and it is a real pleasure to discuss that. Indeed, Northern Ireland—you will probably know this, Ms McVey—is one of the most charitable regions. I am not saying we are better than anybody else, but we are generous when it comes to charitable giving, and I just wanted to put that on the record.

In December 2024, the World Bank warned that developing countries spent a record £1.4 trillion—my goodness, that slipped off my tongue quite easily, but it is an astronomical figure—to service their foreign debts in 2023, and that interest rates had risen to a 20-year high. It concluded that 38 low-income countries, most of them in Africa and Asia, are in debt distress.

Debt cancellation is a reserved UK-wide policy, but Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales contribute to the UK's foreign aid and international development budget, which largely includes the debt relief initiatives for the LICs. The Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network has long advocated for the UK's involvement in providing debt relief to countries struggling with high financial burdens. Has the Minister had the opportunity to hold any discussions with the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network? It is a good organisation that does great work, and it is always encouraging for such organisations to have engagement with Ministers.

It is interesting to look at the at the root cause of the debt. The sad reality is that for many countries, such as those in Africa, it is poverty. It is as simple as that, as graphic as that and as real as that. Poverty in Africa is a long-term and complex issue that impacts millions of lives every day. Political instability, uneven distribution of natural and Government resources, sometimes corruption, and climate change all contribute to this issue. Those who are most affected are often those in rural and remote areas.

There are incredible charities out there, and the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green mentioned some of those that contribute regularly. I want to talk about some of the church groups that contribute through their missions. I think first of Eden missions. Every year, I am fortunate to have engagement with those from Swaziland. A young people's choir comes over and they do some fundraising when they are in our constituency.

We do our best to help and support them in every way we can. Every one of the children in that choir has AIDS, because their parents passed it on to them. They are fortunate to have the drugs that help them. Even with those disabilities, their voices are something special.

I think of the Elim church missions. In the Strangford constituency, there are so many—the best thing might be just to name all the churches. There is the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, the Roman Catholic Church and Baptist churches as well. Then there are the independent churches, which contribute greatly. We see massive Christian faith-based volunteerism and energy to support projects in Africa.

I think in particular of Elim, because I engage with it every year whenever it comes to Northern Ireland. It provides schooling, health and work initiatives. That charity does so much. It prepares people for life and for jobs, whether on the farm, as a doctor or teacher, or whatever it may be. It gives people the opportunity to know how to sow the seeds and reap the crops, so that they can live. When they come to Northern Ireland, we see their smiles and we cannot help being lifted individually.

Those are just some of the people who do this work, along with all the other charities and more that the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green spoke about, and that others will speak of as well. I have no doubt that every one of us could name groups that work beyond belief to provide aid and support to these communities at a local level. In the conversation about debt relief, however, the policies come straight from the Government. These groups do their work outside of Government, but the Government and the policymakers in this House are of massive importance at international level.

The UK has worked incredibly hard to introduce schemes that ultimately write off or suspend large debt from certain countries. I will give four countries as examples—I think the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green mentioned them too. Zambia, Ghana, Chad and Ethiopia have applied to the common framework, which followed on from the debt service suspension initiative that was introduced in 2020. Thus far, an incredible \$12.9 million in payments have been suspended, which will go a massive way to easing pressure and providing a little more financial security for those countries. They are struggling—and, as I said, more often than not the reason is poverty. When it comes to Governments repaying debt, where is the tax coming from if people are on the poverty line to such an extent that they cannot pay it?

From 2001 to 2010, at least 49 low-income countries owing debts to the UK had all or part of their debts forgiven. The total amount of debt owed to the UK is now \$1.8 billion. There are calls for the UK to strengthen legislation on debt repayments. I know the Minister will give us some thoughts on how the Government can help when it comes to debt repayments. Compelling private creditors to be involved in debt relief schemes is one of the options.

The International Development Committee said that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is “uniquely placed”—that is the Committee's opinion, and it is mine, too—to legislate, because 45% of sovereign debts, a large amount, are governed under English law. Is that the Minister's intention? If we have the ability to legislate, as I understand we do, I suggest, very respectfully, humbly and kindly, that we should.

The scale of debt that is owed is huge. We have done our bit recently to ensure fairness to other countries. I thank the Minister and the Labour Government, and the Conservative Government beforehand, for all that they have done. Debt has a huge impact on the development of LICs. We must take that into consideration without forgetting that there are other means through which we can receive payments back. For example, would it be an option for countries to give us something back in kind? I look forward to hearing the Minister's plan to ensure that we protect LICs without putting the development of our own country at risk.

3.24 pm

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for securing this debate.

African nations face a debt crisis caused by global factors—a debt crisis that is leading to more poverty, more hunger and war. They cannot renegotiate the debt, because it is held by private lenders, each of whom, through no fault of their own, has only one incentive: to hold out for a better deal in their fiduciary duty to their shareholders. As the debt is issued in London, we can help private lenders break out of that trap by mandating that all of them must accept the outcome of debt negotiations. That will help us to end the African debt crisis, build functioning states and reduce extreme poverty, all without spending a penny.

Before being elected to this place, I worked as an economist in the Finance Ministry of Somaliland, one of the poorest places on Earth. I helped to write its budgets, its economic policy and its national development plan, and I saw that ending extreme poverty requires an effective Government, as we have seen in India and South Korea. A Government who raise their own revenue are far more effective than a Government who receive it in international aid, because with taxation comes representation.

African nations are stuck, unable to reduce poverty because they are spending one fifth of their revenue—more than they spend on healthcare—paying down debts. They are trapped in that debt because of global factors: post-covid supply shocks, Putin's invasion of Ukraine and rising global interest rates. Debt repayments are up by 30% since 2019, and have more than tripled since 2010.

African nations, like any debtor, need to renegotiate their debt. If that debt was owed solely to other nations, that would be relatively simple, but it is not; it is owed to an unknown multitude of private creditors. Each of those creditors has a fiduciary duty to gain the highest return for its shareholders. Each individual private lender is trapped. They have to hold out, let others take the haircut and try to get the full amount for themselves. They are not bad people and they are not evil, but they are trapped within a system that no individual has the power to break out of.

Today, we can give them that power, because 90% of African debt governed by the common framework is issued under England's legal jurisdiction. We can help to end the debt crisis without spending a penny by changing British law so that private lenders have to abide by the outcome of debt negotiations. Where before, private lenders were trapped, damned if they did forgive and damned if they did not, they would be free to implement sensible debt renegotiations.

I know that some will disagree, and I will take their arguments head on. Some will say that the status quo—things like collective action clauses—is sufficient. That view is wrong. Ghana and Zambia have been waiting 12 months for private lenders to come to the table. They are still waiting. Chadian private debt is not owed in bonds, which means it is not governed by CACs. The current system is not fit for purpose.

Others will say that the proposed reforms would mean that debt would no longer be issued in London. If that were true, it should have happened after we passed the Debt Relief (Developing Countries) Act 2010. It did not. Nations lend here and seek to have their borrowing issued here not because we have weak legal protections, but because we have the strongest and deepest legal system in the world, with centuries of case law. That is why, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) pointed out this week, 95% of African bonds are issued in England and Wales. This solution can work, and that is why the IMF and the World Bank support it.

I was an economist working in one of the poorest nations on earth during its worst drought in living memory. Yes, I saw people starve, but I also saw a nation being built from its own revenues, making budgets and implementing policies. A state that could end extreme poverty was and is in the making in Somaliland. That nation saw its economy grow by 16% in real terms between 2012 and 2020, despite a global pandemic. That reduction in poverty is about more than numbers—it is fewer people scratching around in the dirt desperately hoping that something will grow so that they can feed their children. That is what ending extreme poverty means.

We can end extreme poverty. When my father was born into rural poverty in India, he had a one in four chance of dying before his fifth birthday, while 70% of the world's population lived in extreme poverty. Today, a child born in the same place is 10 times less likely to die, and only one in 10 of the world's people now live in extreme poverty. We can end extreme poverty in the years to come by changing British law to end this debt crisis.

We can live up to and indeed continue the legacy of the former Members for Sedgefield and for Dunfermline East, who helped to cancel £30 billion of debt in 2005. Giving African nations the ability to use their own revenues, build their own Governments and create nations can end poverty. By making sure that private lenders can and must participate in debt renegotiations, we in this place can help to end extreme poverty for free.

3.31 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): I commend the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for organising this debate on a vital and extremely timely topic. As all hon. Members present are likely aware, we face the most acute debt crisis in history. According to CAFOD, more than 3.3 billion people are living in countries where they are forced to spend more on debt servicing than on providing for their citizens. Such high debt-servicing costs prevent those countries from spending on vital public services such as education and health, and investing in sustainable development goals.

[Brian Mathew]

Private lenders make up the largest group of creditors, with many based in the UK and 90% of their contracts governed by English law. Many hon. Members will also be aware that 2025 has been declared a jubilee year by Pope Francis. It is 25 years since the last jubilee debt forgiveness, known as Jubilee 2000, when 40 countries called for the cancellation of third-world debt. Biblically, an important part of the jubilee celebration was the cancellation of debt to give those in need a fresh start. We are told in the Bible not to be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards others, but instead to be open-hearted and freely give what is needed.

For this jubilee year, Pope Francis has made debt cancellation a priority, stating:

“More than a question of generosity, this is a matter of justice.”

We must act now to end the vicious cycle that these countries are trapped in. Without being able to invest in development, countries are unable to grow their economies or fully escape debt. Furthermore, while in debt distress, countries may look to quick solutions that involve exploiting or exporting their natural resources to do so—extracting fossil fuels, mining or logging—and, in the process, worsening climate change. That disproportionately affects those in the global south, but also affects us here at home.

The UK has a significant role to play in solving this problem. As we have heard, 45% of all foreign sovereign debt is governed under English law. The Government have promised to tackle unsustainable debt and must hold private lenders and creditors accountable for that. Furthermore, the previous Government cut international aid from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income—an act that withheld billions of pounds from those most in need. We must restore our aid spending to what it was before, and restore our leadership in the field of international development; in doing so, we will restore our reputation as a kind and generous nation.

3.35 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms McVey. I start by commending my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for bringing forward this crucial debate, and for his continuous campaigning on this matter.

I chair the APPG for Afrikan Reparations and I have long called on the UK Government to engage in discussions around reparative justice. I have said time and again that reparative justice is about just that—justice. It is about more than handing over money; it is about addressing the structural inequalities that colonialism created and still perpetuates, and changing those global structures that keep the global south in its situation. Those inequalities have been instrumental in creating the debt that we are discussing today.

Reparative justice is about addressing disparities that are starkly evident in the fight against climate change, particularly in the context of our international financial system, which is, quite frankly, a relic of the 20th century. Worsening droughts in east Africa, tropical hurricanes in the Caribbean, and tsunamis in Asia show how Britain's former colonies remain disproportionately vulnerable to the frontline effects of crises that they did little to cause. Not only did we engage in colonial crimes, but we remain a leading historical emitter.

The UK could take responsibility by reframing reparative justice within the context of climate justice. We could fund large-scale restoration projects, compensate for biodiversity loss, and help nations to adapt to climate change. That form of reparative justice could remove the burden of debt that is preventing those countries from fighting the climate emergency themselves, by building infrastructure to defend against some of the environmental challenges that, if we do not get our act together, will be permanent.

Some of the world's poorest and most climate-vulnerable countries are seeing their debt payments grow twice as fast as their climate support—they do not stand a chance. When faced with extreme weather conditions every year, such as deadly floods and droughts, they are forced to borrow more and more to support their people and rebuild their infrastructure—adding to their already insurmountable debt.

In 2022, I joined a parliamentary delegation to Kenya with CAFOD and saw at first hand the impact of famine and drought on the people living in Marsabit County. Their agriculture and their livestock had been decimated—the country had been decimated—by one of the worst droughts in living memory. The situation that we all saw on the ground in Kenya brought home the devastating ramifications of the climate crisis, and the inequities that it is rooted in—inequities that we benefited from and have sustained since.

Kenya is not a notable emitter of carbon dioxide and does not drastically contribute to climate destruction. In fact, it is responsible for just 0.03% of global carbon dioxide emissions to date—around 160 times less than the United Kingdom. Yet man-made climate change, for which the UK has historical responsibility, is causing untold levels of destruction in that nation, and its debt crisis means that, like many other countries mentioned today, it is unable to take meaningful steps to address it. In 2021, its debt repayments were more than five times the amount of money the Government were spending on measures to tackle the climate crisis. Like many other countries, it is fighting this crisis with both hands tied behind its back.

Countries in the global south will face an estimated \$290 billion to \$580 billion in climate-related loss and damage every year by 2030—every single year. At the start of the covid-19 pandemic, the G20 agreed a scheme to suspend debt payments for over 70 countries, but because private lenders were not made to participate on equal terms, countries that applied to the scheme had under a quarter of external debt payments suspended.

As hon. Members have mentioned, over 90% of the bonds owned by countries eligible for debt relief, under G20 schemes, are governed by English law. That means that they are under our control, and we can actually do something about them. The UK could play a leading role in addressing the debt crisis, instead of standing by as private creditors are bailed out. The Government should be supporting efforts to cancel debts for all climate-vulnerable countries with unsustainable debts by expanding the G20 common framework to include middle-income nations, and strengthen it to ensure that private creditors participate. To be frank, we know that the situation for the average person in some so-called middle-income nations is still dire.

I call on the Government to enhance the UK's commitment on international climate finance overall and to encourage other countries to do the same. That should

be done through a comprehensive financing facility to offer unconditional grants, not more debt, to countries facing climate disaster, to push for automatic debt payment suspension and relief for countries in the event of a climate-related disaster, and to introduce legislation to stop private creditors from suing those same climate-vulnerable countries. The UK's role as a major historical emitter, a former colonial power and a current global leader places a special obligation on us to put climate justice at the heart of the global response to the disaster we now face.

Some people ask: why reparative justice and not simply aid? That is because aid has not worked, and when a duty is put on people to do something, and when they understand that they owe somebody something as a matter of justice, they are more likely to do it. Aid has become an industry. Aid itself is subject to supply and demand, and so many countries are not benefiting from it in the way that they should be. We need to look at this issue as one of reparative justice, and we the UK have to pay what we owe.

3.41 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for bringing this important issue to the House, and I praise his work on raising awareness of it.

For decades many low-income nations have struggled under the weight of unsustainable debt, spending billions servicing debt that prevents them from addressing the needs of their people or responding to the climate emergency, threatening a wave of political instability. It also prevents them from long-term investment in healthcare, education and infrastructure—the essential pillars of progress and stability.

Lower-income countries have been facing increasingly unsustainable debts since the 2008 financial crisis, with debt payments increasing by over 200% between 2010 and 2025—reaching the highest level since the mid-1990s. That is no surprise when we consider the combination of the covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the global monetary tightening that has exposed vulnerable economies to insurmountable debt challenges, as private capital inflow stopped and sovereign defaults ensued for already vulnerable frontier communities.

The Liberal Democrats were the first to call for debt cancellation and have been calling for faster and stronger action on the global debt crisis ever since, because the case for debt cancellation is clear. It provides immediate relief, allows Governments to prioritise social investment and fosters long-term economic growth. Over the long term, it allows those countries to become less reliant on overseas development assistance from countries such as the UK. History shows that when debt relief is granted, countries are able to improve public services, reduce poverty and achieve sustainable development goals. When countries are crushed by debt, however, that leads to instability, mass migration crises that end up in the UK, and economic stagnation that affects us all.

Faster and stronger action on the debt crisis is particularly important in Africa. In 2023, African countries spent over 50 times more on external debt than they received in aid from the UK, and 50% more than the total aid to

the region. That is why we are clear in our support of aligning the UK with the African Union's push for full debt cancellation.

The current mechanism for debt cancellation, via the common framework, has been too slow in its progress on cases, with only four countries having applied and only three reaching agreement—Zambia, Ghana and Chad, with Ethiopia still in talks. Clearly, the Government must improve those mechanisms, and I note that the International Development Committee 2023 report on debt cancellation for low-income countries made recommendations for the previous Government. Many of those remain outstanding, so I hope the Minister will address that today.

I hope that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's upcoming development review will focus closely on the critical interplay between debt and development in its strategy. That is essential, because this Labour Government have presided over a further real-terms cut to the official development assistance budget, making it even lower than it was under the last Conservative Administration. Under this Government, there has been an absolute cut in the level of support being provided to the world's poorest people.

Low-income countries have been put between a rock and a hard place for too long, forced to service ever-increasing debts with less and less overseas development assistance from the likes of the UK and now, of course, the US. That has compelled such countries to service debt rather than helping their most vulnerable people, plunging those nations into further poverty.

I sincerely hope the Minister can reassure us today that the Government will return to spending 0.7% of GNI on ODA. I hope that the news that there will be no new funding at the Nutrition for Growth summit this month is not a harbinger of the trajectory of the Government's spend on international aid, and that the UK will return to its role leading on international development, particularly given the USA's apparent retreat. I look forward to hearing what she has to say shortly.

I draw to a close by re-emphasising that although the UK's ability to act independently is limited by international agreements, it has significant influence over debt restructuring, with 45% of all sovereign debts governed by English law. I look forward to hearing how the Government intend to strengthen the common framework and address the root causes of debt accumulation, including unfair trade policies, exploitative lending practices and lack of financial transparency. It is time for a new financial framework that stops the cycle of debt dependency, and it is time for Britain to restate its commitment to the world's poorest.

3.46 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey, for the first time as a shadow Minister.

I commend the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for securing this debate. Constituency names have changed; I have always known him as the hon. Member for Enfield Southgate. He spoke with real passion today, and he brings with him knowledge and expertise about a topic that we must all focus on more carefully. It is a sensitive issue, and we

[Andrew Rosindell]

must ensure we get it right. It should not be a party political issue; we should be looking for solutions. I think that today's debate has contributed to that important discussion, so I thank him for securing it.

As has been mentioned, Britain is a nation that has always been known for its Christian compassion. At the same time, we have always advocated the principle of helping others to help themselves as the best pathway to providing long-term sustainability, particularly for developing nations, many of which have been mentioned in the debate.

So many contributions have been very powerful, particularly that of the hon. Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher), who spoke about Somaliland. I met representatives from Somaliland recently. It is so important that we use our knowledge and expertise to help developing countries to develop the type of economy that will generate wealth and prosperity. Having such debts around their necks will not help them to get out of their problems and become prosperous in the future. The hon. Gentleman drew on his expertise, and I commend him for it.

Others have spoken about issues such as colonialism. To be frank, I am not convinced that the hon. Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) should focus on colonialism. There are other, more unifying things that we should talk about. Britain can lead the way in this if we get things right, but talking about Britain's past wrongs—they are subjective, and there are a lot of good things that Britain has done—and tying everything to colonialism is a divisive route to go down. Let us look at solutions and advocate ideas that offer a way forward, rather than creating political division.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: This is not necessarily a divisive issue. When we ask those who are suffering the most from these matters, we find that they believe that it is difficult to move forward because of some of the wrongs that have been done to them in the past. It is simply about recognition and looking at ways to tackle this issue, and at how we can deliver recompense for the wrong that we have done. It is not about being divisive; it is just about accepting what went wrong and understanding that we have a duty to make it right.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that this debate is about debt cancellation for low-income countries.

Andrew Rosindell: I respect the hon. Member's point, but she did say that we should pay what we owe. All kinds of arguments can be put forward about what we owe, but it is a matter of opinion. Today we should bring unity and look for solutions, rather than making this a political issue. We can achieve more for developing countries if we work together, rather than looking at where things have gone wrong or right in history and at who may owe what, depending on what is going on in the world today. I do not think that will get us very far, so we should move on from that and focus on how we restructure the repayment of debt, and how we can develop a better system globally to deal with this issue, rather than looking too far back into history.

It has been clear to me, right from when I stood for Parliament for the first time, that this issue needs to be addressed. That has been confirmed by the passion that hon. Members have shown in today's debate. Debt relief deserves serious consideration, and the Opposition recognise that. Unsustainable debt burdens can be huge and significant impediments to economic development and growth, trapping nations in a cycle of poverty. However, I believe that we must approach this matter in a responsible way, with both caution and pragmatism.

If pursued, debt relief must be conditional and tied to a strong policy of fiscal responsibility measures, so I hope the Minister will provide assurances that any recipient countries would be expected to implement sound economic policies, tackle corruption and take steps to prevent future over-borrowing. I do not think the Minister can disagree that without those safeguards, we risk creating a system in which there is financial mismanagement in perpetuity. We should focus on rewarding the expense of responsible governance. Making the hard-pressed British taxpayer foot the bill is not acceptable to most of our constituents, and we need solutions. We need to solve these problems and not see this as a one-way street.

If the United Kingdom taxpayer's money is involved, I want the Government to tell us how they will ensure that such relief also serves the interests of the British people. During these difficult economic times, we must justify every single penny spent by the Government and always be mindful that it is our constituents' money, not the Government's. Debt relief must become not an open-ended commitment, but a strategic tool that strengthens bilateral ties and ensures geopolitical stability.

I hope the Minister can tell us how the Government intend to prioritise sustainable development, and what mechanisms are in place to monitor that. I also hope she will agree that the focus should be not on perpetual aid or blanket debt forgiveness, but on fostering economic self-sufficiency. That is the only sustainable way forward. We must also consider how the United Kingdom can play a meaningful part in helping low-income countries to develop their domestic industries, improve resource management and reduce their reliance on foreign debt. Without those structural changes, would debt relief simply serve as a temporary fix, or would she prefer to have a system that offers a sustainable solution? That is what the Opposition want.

Jim Shannon: I would never wish to be anything other than supportive of what the hon. Gentleman says, but everyone who has spoken so far has mentioned the charities and groups that contribute and sometimes fill the gap. May I ask, respectfully, if some recognition could be given to those groups?

Andrew Rosindell: The hon. Member touched on this in his speech earlier, as did the hon. Member for Melksham and Devizes. That is another new constituency name, and I think it includes Chippenham. Is that part of the hon. Gentleman's constituency?

Brian Mathew: No, but it is in Wiltshire.

Andrew Rosindell: It is in Wiltshire, so it is in that part of the world—a great part of the world.

Many churches and faith organisations, not just Christian, do a huge amount in all our constituencies to help raise funds to alleviate poverty. In my constituency, churches and the Christian organisations take the lead in this, and it is a wonderful thing. If we are to alleviate world poverty and deal with the restructuring of international debt, it has to be a collective thing. It is not just about Governments; other sectors must be involved in these discussions. We must all give credit to the charities, church organisations, faith groups and other parts of the voluntary sector that raise money week in, week out, to help to alleviate poverty and for disaster relief in different parts of the world. As Members of Parliament, we all know that from our constituencies. I commend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and all Members for the charities, churches and organisations in their constituencies that do that incredible work.

We simply cannot ignore the geopolitical dimension. The belt and road initiative from the People's Republic of China has created debt dependency, threatening many sovereign nations around the world. Will the Minister tell the House how the Government intend to counterbalance Beijing's influence and provide a credible alternative to Chinese financing, which is of great concern? Will debt relief and the belt and road initiative feature in the Government's China audit? Can she also confirm that any UK-backed debt restructuring would promote transparency, fair economic partnerships and long-term stability?

Beyond individual cases, will the Government tell us how they plan to advocate for more responsible lending and borrowing practices that ensure that relief leads to lasting improvements rather than repeated crisis? Does the Minister also accept that we should be looking beyond debt cancellation and focusing on investment incentives, infrastructure partnerships and trade agreements that enable these countries to generate revenue and pay their debts? How will the Government ensure that their approach fosters economic growth rather than continued reliance on external assistance?

It is crucial that any policy pursued by His Majesty's Government is effective and responsible. Debt relief can be a force for good when structured correctly, but it must be part of a broader strategy that promotes economic resilience, accountability and sustainable development. The Government must navigate these challenges while always ensuring that British interests remain protected.

3.59 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds):

Thank you for calling me, Ms McVey. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, and I am sure not the last.

I thank the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for drawing attention to these issues and for bringing this debate on debt cancellation to Westminster Hall today. I also thank the other Members, whose speeches have made for a rich discussion on this issue. I will mention them briefly and then hope to come to everyone's questions, should time allow. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his kind words about my appointment—I am still early in my time in this role. I also thank him for

underlining the importance of the role of charities in the development work that they do in low-income and vulnerable countries.

My hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher) spoke with great passion about his experience working in Somaliland. He brings great insights to the House after working in that capacity previously. I thank the hon. Members for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew) and for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) for stressing that the UK needs to restore our leadership on international development. I will come to some of their questions later in my contribution.

I also want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) for raising crucial points about the situation that many low-income countries vulnerable to the impacts of climate change find themselves in. I will say a little more about that, too.

The Government are highly concerned by the debt challenges faced by many low and middle-income countries, with 3.3 billion people living in countries that spend more on servicing their debt than on health or education—a point made by many hon. Members. Among low-income countries, 10 are currently in debt distress and 25 are at high risk, and there is an urgent need to address the vulnerabilities. As a Government, we are fully committed to tackling unsustainable debt burdens in a way that supports development needs and helps countries address those vulnerabilities.

We are acting in three key ways. I will attempt to answer questions, particularly from my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green who secured the debate, when discussing the three key ways. The first is on addressing liquidity challenges; the second is on ensuring effective debt restructurings; and the third is on promoting debt resilience.

First, on addressing liquidity challenges, we are working with international partners to address immediate liquidity pressures facing many countries, which are crowding out vital spending on climate, health and education. We support the IMF and World Bank's three-pillar approach, which is designed to support countries with high debt repayments. The first pillar is focused on action from vulnerable countries to improve revenue mobilisation and implement sound economic policies. The second focuses on ensuring that countries receive new flows of finance at concessional rates from international financial institutions and other development partners. The final pillar looks at providing case-by-case action to reduce the cost of existing debt burdens where needed.

Secondly, we are working to address debt vulnerabilities through improving the effectiveness of debt restructurings for countries in debt distress. The G20 common framework remains the best mechanism for co-ordinating debt restructurings to address unsustainable debt burdens, but further progress is needed.

The UK is working closely with the G20 and other international partners to ensure the framework delivers more timely, orderly and predictable debt restructurings. I know that is high on the priority list of the South African G20 presidency this year. The UK will be pressing for rapid implementation of the lessons learned from the common framework, which were agreed under the Brazilian presidency of the G20 last year.

The private sector, which has been mentioned by many hon. Members, must also play its part in debt restructuring efforts. We are actively engaging with private

[Emma Reynolds]

sector partners—for example, through the global sovereign debt roundtable—to ensure continued private sector support for addressing the debt challenges faced by countries, leveraging the City of London's leading role in sovereign debt markets.

Several Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green, mentioned the issue of private creditors and whether we needed legislation to force them to participate. The Government are not currently seeing evidence that private creditors are refusing to participate in debt restructurings. Recently, private bondholders have agreed to debt treatments for common framework countries, including Zambia and Ghana. We are working closely with the private sector through bilateral meetings, engagement with representative institutions and Paris club discussions.

Hon. Members also raised the issue of comparable treatment by private creditors. I reiterate that both Zambia and Ghana have reached agreements on debt restructurings with their private bondholders. Official creditors have deemed these comparable with their own restructurings.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green raised the need for UK leadership on debt relief, and we heard that from others, too. I highlight that the UK has a strong track record of pushing for effective and holistic solutions to debt challenges, including supporting the IMF's three-pillar approach for countries facing liquidity challenges and pushing for more effective co-operation and co-ordination under the G20's common framework. The UK also co-ordinates debt treatment through our membership of the Paris club and our commitments to the G20 common framework in partnership with other creditors.

This is a key point: unilaterally writing off debt owed to the UK would not be in the interests of the UK taxpayer—the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), mentioned the UK taxpayer, of course—which would be subsidising ongoing payments to other creditors if done unilaterally. The Government are therefore working closely with borrowers, official and private creditors, and the IMF and World Bank to strengthen the wider debt architecture and provide timely and co-ordinated restructurings for countries, where needed to support holistic debt sustainability for low-income countries.

The third way that the Government are pursuing this issue is through tackling unsustainable debt by promoting greater resilience in debt markets. In response to the shadow Minister, I mention that the UK is committed to provide sovereign financing on sustainable terms and to act in an open and transparent manner to support global debt sustainability.

We are playing a leadership role internationally in several key ways. The hon. Members for Melksham and Devizes and for Esher and Walton asked what the UK was doing to provide leadership.

Jim Shannon: My contribution, not that it was better than anybody else's, put forward the idea that the countries we are helping with debt might be able to supply us with some goods as a way of paying us back, rather than making a financial repayment. Is that something that the Minister and the Government would look at?

Emma Reynolds: I am not sure that is something we are actively considering, but I will check and write to the hon. Gentleman.

In December 2024, we were the first country to publish our self-assessment against the G20's operational guidelines for sustainable financing. In line with those guidelines, we publish annual reports on the total stock of debt owed to the UK, including reports on our new sovereign lending transactions.

Finally, we are committed to provide sovereign financing on sustainable terms, adhering to the OECD's sustainable lending principles. My hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green also suggested creating a private sector transparency register. The UK supports all initiatives to improve debt transparency and is open to considering proposals for such a register. We also acknowledge the ongoing work by Georgetown University in this area.

The UK has led the way in promoting debt resilience through the introduction of contractual innovations, an approach that the IMF has found to be working well. Under our G7 presidency in 2021, the UK developed two contractual innovations together with private sector stakeholders. The first relates to external shocks, which my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green mentioned in his speech. Climate resilient debt clauses help to strengthen the resilience of vulnerable countries by suspending debt repayments in the wake of external shocks, which frees up fiscal space for the country. The UK has led the way by including CRDCs in our own lending and calling for all lenders to adopt CRDCs by the end of this year.

Second, the UK helped to develop majority voting provisions, which are for use by the private sector specifically for syndicated lending. MVPs allow a majority of creditors to bind the minority to the terms of a restructuring and thereby mitigate the risk of a minority of creditors holding out in a restructuring scenario, which hon. Members mentioned in their contributions, and enable more efficient debt restructuring processes.

On Monday, at her speech at the London Stock Exchange, the Minister for Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), announced that the FCDO will provide technical assistance for borrower countries that intend to include majority voting provisions in their contractual agreements with private sector lenders.

I will now turn to a couple of questions that were asked during the debate. I apologise if I do not get to answer all the questions in the time available; I promise to write to hon. Members if I do not get to all of them. My hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green asked about reforming the governance of international organisations. We agree that more needs to be done. First, we must change the international financial system in order to deliver a fairer deal for developing countries, including by using our board seats at the IMF and the World Bank, for a bolder approach on unsustainable debt. Secondly, we need to ensure that our system is more representative of those most in need, so we will make the case for not only fairer outcomes, but fairer representation in how we represent them.

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Esher and Walton, asked whether the Government would return to spending 0.7% of GDP on development,

which the last Labour Government were very proud to commit to and reach. This Government remain committed to restoring ODA spending to 0.7% as soon as fiscal circumstances allow. Although the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts show that the tests have not yet been met, we continue to monitor these forecasts closely and remain one of the top ODA providers in the G7.

There were a number of questions about climate, including from my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill, and I want to make a few comments about that. To strengthen the resilience of vulnerable countries and free up fiscal space when responding to shocks caused by climate change, the UK has led the way in encouraging the broader adoption of climate resilient debt clauses, which suspend debt repayments, on a cost-neutral basis, in the wake of exogenous shocks. We welcome creditors who have committed to providing CRDCs, and encourage others to follow suit.

My hon. Friend also said that the common framework should be expanded to middle-income countries and offer an automatic suspension for countries that apply for restructuring. The UK is fully committed to making the common framework a success. We support expansion of the framework to middle-income countries and providing automatic debt standstills for countries that apply for restructuring under the framework. We continue to push for those reforms in the G20. I hope that answers her question on that point.

I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Romford, for his contribution—I think this is the first time that we have debated this way. He asked about reassurance on sound economic policy and preventing corruption. We agree that any lending and policy must be agreed on a sustainable basis. First, the scale of debt treatments is set under the IMF's debt sustainability analysis. Secondly, the UK is committed to acting in an open and transparent way, as we have shown by publishing our own self-assessment against G20 guidelines. The hon. Gentleman asked a number of other questions. He was talking about open-ended commitments and sustainability. I think we all agree we want to reduce the reliance of low-income countries on foreign debt. That is what this debate is about, and we want a sustainable solution. He asked about the role of China specifically. I am happy to write to him, in a follow-up to his questions, on that. All I will say now is that it is really important that we work with all international partners

on this issue, because only by working multilaterally will we have success in the sense of providing sustainable solutions. We do not think we can act alone.

I thank all hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions during today's important debate. Together with the international community, we must work actively and urgently in order to address the significant debt challenges faced by vulnerable countries, and the Government are committed to doing just that.

4.13 pm

Bambos Charalambous: I will be brief. I very much welcome the Minister's responses, certainly in relation to financial institutions and reforming the IMF, representation, how we look at debt, and transparency. In relation to external shocks, I think we should look at automatic cancellation of debt when a country is facing a climate event, for example. I very much hope that that can be looked into, long term.

On comparable treatment, I know that the Minister has taken that on board and will be looking into it further. I disagree with her on legislation in relation to private creditors. Private creditors have not shown themselves to be responsible in this matter. I have given examples of private creditors who have not engaged in the G20 framework in the way they were expected to. I hope that, if the Minister does have regular meetings with them, she is able to convey this message to them. Until we see changes, I certainly will be pursuing legislation through my private Member's Bill, the Debt Relief (Developing Countries) Bill.

We have had a good discussion today, and I thank all Members for contributing as they have, to show the unanimity on what we would like to see done. I think we all support debt cancellation and would like to see more done to help low-income countries—the most vulnerable ones—to get back on a level footing so that they can develop their economies as we would like to see them develop.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered debt cancellation for low-income countries.

4.15 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 6 February 2025

DEFENCE

Armed Forces Recruitment

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): As the world changes, and the threat the UK faces evolves, we must ensure our armed forces recruitment is right for the 21st century.

Recognising this, we are today announcing two new initiatives to remove outdated and unnecessary barriers and fast-track bright candidates into UK defence.

The first is a brand new fast-track entry into military cyber careers to boost UK cyber defence.

Cyber represents a new frontline, with our military systems targeted every day by adversaries. UK networks are facing growing numbers of “sub-threshold” attacks—more than 90,000 in the last two years.

Fast-tracking cyber warriors into our military will help bolster our capabilities in response to these growing threats and address a global shortage of cyber talent.

The new, bespoke entry route we are opening today will see basic training reduced from 10 weeks to around one month, after which recruits will undergo three months of specialist training. This will be conducted at the Defence Cyber Academy in Shrivenham.

By the end of 2025, new recruits will be embedded into operational roles, either securing Defence’s networks and services at the digital headquarters in Corsham or conducting cyber operations to counter those who would do the UK harm as part of the National Cyber Force.

The scheme is open to any aspiring cyber professionals and those with existing digital skills and will play a crucial role in maintaining a competitive edge in our national cyber defence capabilities.

Secondly, we are announcing the award of the contract for the new tri-service armed forces recruiting service (AFRS). Joining the armed forces will become quicker and easier under a new first-of-its kind recruitment service that cuts red tape and transforms the way people sign up to serve.

The first ever tri-service recruitment service will provide a streamlined, single-entry point for prospective recruits, with the aim of attracting the best talent from across the country into the armed forces to strengthen national security. The service will launch in 2027, replacing the individual schemes run by the Royal Navy, British Army, and Royal Air Force.

Existing processes have struggled to meet the evolving needs of modern recruitment, with inefficiencies and delays leading to fewer than 1 in 10 applicants joining in 2023.

Under the innovative new recruitment service, candidates will complete one application and one medical evaluation via a single, digital system—offering a more straightforward process that seeks to retain applicant interest.

Our ambition is for those who apply to serve our country to receive a conditional answer within 10 days and a training start date within 30 days.

The new contract will ensure better value for taxpayer money and better outcomes for our armed forces. The Ministry of Defence will mimic the Cabinet Office’s standard model services contract, allowing for decisive action on supplier-caused performance issues through profit-based performance goals and contract break-clauses.

Developed in partnership with Serco, the new programme will ultimately help to ensure that the UK military remains ready to face emerging threats while enhancing the support for those who serve.

AFRS will also see service personnel playing an active role in the recruitment process, leveraging their unique skills and experience to engage the next generation of military professionals.

This Government are deeply proud of those who serve our country and we are determined to fix the crisis in recruitment and retention we inherited.

These are just the latest actions this Government are taking to put people at the heart of defence. Since July we have delivered the largest pay rise for service personnel in over 20 years—including a 35% pay increase for new recruits—scrapped more than 100 outdated policies that slow down or block recruitment, and are progressing through Parliament legislation to establish an Armed Forces Commissioner to champion service personnel and their families.

By making it quicker and easier for people to sign up to serve, while maintaining the very highest standards, we will strengthen our armed forces and make the UK secure at home and strong abroad.

[HCWS422]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Nuclear Energy: Consenting and Regulation

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): The UK’s nuclear sector is at the beginning of a significant expansion in both civil and defence nuclear programmes and will play a key role in delivering the Government’s clean energy superpower mission. Given the sector’s contribution to economic growth, this Government will ensure the right enablers are in place, including effective and proportionate regulation and a suitably flexible planning framework.

The Prime Minister is commissioning an independent taskforce to look at the regulatory framework and regulations affecting nuclear across both civil and defence sectors. The task force will examine how to deliver nuclear faster and cost-effectively in support of growth and innovation, while maintaining the UK’s high standards of nuclear safety, security and non-proliferation. It will be led by an independent expert and will report to the Prime Minister and present options to me, the Defence Secretary, and Chief Secretary to the Treasury to consider in summer 2025.

To improve the planning framework for nuclear infrastructure, today I laid a draft national policy statement (NPS) on nuclear energy infrastructure, called EN-7, before Parliament.

The energy NPSs set out national energy planning policy and form the framework for my decision-making on applications for development consent for nationally significant infrastructure projects (NSIP) concerning energy under the Planning Act 2008. EN-7 sets out the policy for considering development consent applications for new nuclear fission infrastructure. It introduces a criteria-based approach, removes the deployment deadline for new projects, and expands the range of technologies covered to include small modular reactors and advanced modular reactors in addition to the existing gigawatt-scale reactors. The new planning framework is robust, transparent and agile and will empower developers to identify potentially suitable sites against a robust set of criteria ensuring safety, sustainability and the mitigation of impacts on the host community.

This is the beginning of the formal parliamentary procedure to designate it and bring it into force as provided for in the Planning Act 2008. From the day on which the draft EN-7 is laid, Parliament will have a “relevant period” according to the Planning Act 2008 to review the draft EN-7, raise questions and make recommendations. The relevant period for EN-7 will start on 6 February 2025 and elapse no sooner than 23 June 2025, provided I have discharged my duty to lay a statement before Parliament addressing any resolutions passed by either House or recommendations made by parliamentary Committees regarding the draft EN-7. A public consultation on EN-7 will run alongside this stage of the parliamentary procedure. Officials will summarise responses to this consultation for interested parliamentary Committees once they have all been received.

After the relevant period has elapsed, the NPS will be laid in Parliament in its final form for approval by resolution by the House of Commons, or by deemed consent by the House of Commons following a 21-sitting-day “consideration period”.

[HCWS419]

Energy Infrastructure Planning Projects

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): This statement concerns an application for development consent made under the Planning Act 2008 by Rampion Extension Development Ltd for the construction and operation of an offshore generating station comprised of up to 90 wind turbine generators, off the coast of West Sussex.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make a decision on an application within three months of the receipt of the examining authority’s report unless exercising the power under section 107(3) of the Act to set a new deadline. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it.

The statutory deadline for the decision on the Rampion 2 offshore wind farm extension project was 6 February 2025. I have decided to allow an extension and to set a new deadline of 4 April 2025. This is to allow time to request further information.

The decision to set the new deadline for this application is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS420]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND
DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Official Development Assistance: Programme
Allocations 2024-25

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): The FCDO annual report and accounts 2023-24, published in July 2024, set out that the FCDO would provide updates in due course on its 2024-25 official development assistance spending plans.

ODA is central for delivering the Government’s mission to help create a world free from poverty on a liveable planet, working in a modern, genuine partnership with the global south. FCDO’s ODA spending will be used to achieve better development outcomes as part of a coherent international approach, with a strong focus on poverty reduction and accelerating progress on the sustainable development goals. Our approach to development will deliver inclusive growth, tackle the climate crisis and address irregular migration.

Plans to reduce asylum costs are creating more space in the ODA budget to spend on our international development priorities overseas. This is reflected in the FCDO’s ODA programme budget for 2024-25 and 2025-26.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I are determined that the FCDO’s ODA spending will reach those who need it most, listening to our partners, and focusing on where the UK can have the biggest impact, delivering value for money for the British taxpayer.

Since coming into office, the Foreign Secretary and I have reviewed the FCDO’s ODA plans for the current financial year, 2024-25. Our objective has been to prioritise predictability and stability in budgets after years of turbulence under the previous Government. We have therefore not reduced planned budgets except in relatively few areas where circumstances meant teams were unable to deliver their full budgets, or where some reprioritisation has been required to respond to changes in operating context. With these exceptions, reductions from previously published spending plans identified in the data below are a result of the previous Government’s decisions.

Instead, our focus has been on ensuring any reallocations or increases in spending needed to meet the Government’s commitment to spend 0.5% of GNI on ODA each calendar year have been targeted effectively. For example, we have delivered a major increase of £113m in humanitarian funding for people in Sudan and those who have fled to neighbouring countries, doubling our commitment to Sudan and the region this year.

I would now like to update the House on our indicative 2024-25 ODA spending plans. Due to the dynamic nature of the FCDO’s global work, programme plans are continually reviewed and adjusted in-year. Final out-turn data and future planned allocations will be published in the 2024-25 FCDO annual report and accounts in summer 2025.

FCDO’s 2024-25 ODA Programme Allocations	
	FCDO ODA (£000)
Regional programmes	
<i>Africa</i>	1,545,073
Democratic Republic of the Congo	107,471
Ethiopia	216,900

FCDO's 2024-25 ODA Programme Allocations	FCDO ODA (£000)
Ghana and Liberia	16,125
Kenya	79,126
Malawi	50,388
Mozambique	49,207
Nigeria	116,972
Other African countries ¹	1,753
Africa Programmes and Expertise Department	138,184
Rwanda	31,238
Sahel, Sudan and South Sudan Department ²	102,100
Sierra Leone	29,805
Somalia	142,645
South Africa	14,033
South Sudan	134,125
Sudan	140,315
Tanzania	55,963
Uganda	45,681
Zambia	41,715
Zimbabwe	31,327
Americas	85,955
Brazil	87
Caribbean Development Team	84,000
Colombia	1,295
Other American countries ³	573
Overseas Territories	97,633
Overseas Territories	97,633
Europe	31,900
Turkey	18,900
Western Balkans	13,000
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	264,056
Central Asia ⁴	12,686
Eastern neighbourhood ⁵	14,330
Other eastern European and central Asian countries ⁶	290
Ukraine	236,750
Indo Pacific	279,718
Bangladesh	61,200
India	2,000
Indo Pacific Regional Team	43,780
Indonesia	44,771
Myanmar	65,041
Nepal	60,138
Other South Asia Countries ⁷	195
Other South East Asia and Pacific Countries ⁸	2,593
Middle East and North Africa	852,545
Afghanistan	171,000
Egypt	4,000
Iraq	5,175
Jordan	68,000
Lebanon	56,075
Middle East and North Africa regional team	31,000
Occupied Palestinian Territories	129,000
Pakistan	98,753
Syria	145,542
Yemen	144,000
Regional Programmes Total	3,156,880

FCDO's 2024-25 ODA Programme Allocations	FCDO ODA (£000)
<i>Policy priorities, international organisations and humanitarian British investment partnerships</i>	<i>1,147,195</i>
<i>Centre for Delivery</i>	<i>697</i>
<i>Development and open societies</i>	<i>76,328</i>
<i>Trade and economic security</i>	<i>14,426</i>
<i>Economics and evaluation</i>	<i>8,902</i>
<i>Education, gender and equality</i>	<i>499,423</i>
<i>Energy, climate and environment</i>	<i>433,304</i>
<i>Europe</i>	<i>389,000</i>
<i>Health</i>	<i>980,736</i>
<i>Humanitarian, migration and food security</i>	<i>307,436</i>
<i>International finance</i>	<i>999,126</i>
<i>Multilateral and human rights</i>	<i>13,945</i>
<i>Office for Conflict, Stabilisation and Mediation</i>	<i>22,000</i>
<i>Research and evidence</i>	<i>499,356</i>
<i>Policy priorities, international organisations and humanitarian total</i>	<i>5,391,874</i>
<i>Non-departmental public bodies and scholarships total</i>	<i>224,300</i>
<i>BBC World Service total</i>	<i>76,900</i>
<i>Multilateral subscriptions to international organisations total</i>	<i>84,029</i>
<i>Other central programmes total</i>	<i>35,362</i>
<i>Crisis reserve total⁹</i>	<i>15,000</i>
<i>Integrated Security Fund (ISF) total¹⁰</i>	<i>316,135</i>
<i>Total</i>	<i>9,300,480</i>

1. Other African countries includes Angola, Botswana, Cameroon, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Eritrea, Eswatini, Guinea, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Namibia, Niger, Senegal, Seychelles, and the Gambia.

2. Included in Sahel, Sudan and South Sudan Department are the regional programmes—allocated separately to the country allocations: Sudan; South Sudan.

3. Other American countries includes Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Latin America Department, Network Ops, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Saint Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uruguay.

4. Central Asia includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan.

5. Eastern neighbourhood includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova.

6. Other eastern European and central Asian countries includes Belarus and regional spend which cannot be attributed to a single country.

7. Other south Asia Countries includes Maldives and Sri Lanka.

8. Other south-east Asia and Pacific countries includes Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, Fiji, Laos, Malaysia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Thailand, Tonga, Vietnam and Vanuatu.

9. The crisis reserve for 2024-25 was set at £50 million with £35 million allocated out to the approved countries in-year.

10. From April 2024, CSSF was renamed to the UK Integrated Security Fund (ISF). ISF spend by regional, cross regional and non-discretionary theme is reported in the ISF annual report.

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Improving Social Housing Quality and Strengthening Tenant Voice

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): Alongside our commitment to delivering the biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation, the Government are determined to drive a transformational and lasting change in the safety and quality of social housing.

The Government recognise that many social housing landlords provide safe and decent homes to their tenants, ensure they receive services that meet their needs, and act quickly to resolve complaints.

We appreciate the vital role that providers of social housing play, and we commend those who strive continuously to ensure they are fulfilling their core purpose and are treating their tenants with fairness and respect. We remain committed to working in partnership with the sector to improve the quality of life for those living in social housing across the country.

However, it is not in dispute that far too many tenants still live in homes that are not well managed or maintained and often struggle to secure adequate redress. English housing survey data makes clear that in 2023, 7% of social rented homes had a damp problem and 4% had hazards rated at the most dangerous category 1 level. It is imperative that we take action to address this indefensible situation.

This statement sets out the next steps the Government intend to take to clamp down on damp, mould and other hazards in social homes by introducing Awaab's law to the social rented sector. It also updates the House on other measures we will introduce in due course to drive up the safety and quality of social homes.

Awaab's law

I wish to pay tribute once again to the parents of Awaab Ishak, Faisal Abdullah and Aisha Amin. They have tenaciously and courageously fought to secure justice, not only for their son but for all of those who live in social housing.

Awaab's law is vital legislation that will empower social tenants to hold their landlords to account using the full force of the law if they fail to investigate and fix hazards within their homes within set timescales. It will also allow tenants to access the housing ombudsman if their landlord does not adhere to strict timelines for action.

While progress is also dependent on a more fundamental change in the culture and values of social housing providers, Awaab's law will play an integral role in ensuring that all social landlords take complaints about hazards seriously; respond to them in a timely and professional manner; and treat tenants with empathy, dignity and respect.

Over 1,000 responses to the consultation on Awaab's law were received from social housing landlords, social housing tenants, industry experts and members of the public. The Government thank everyone who took the time to respond for their constructive engagement on this critical policy.

We have carefully considered all the responses submitted to the consultation and have been working closely with campaigners, social housing tenants, and social landlords to ensure the implementation of this landmark reform will be effective, proportionate and of lasting benefit to social housing tenants. We will publish shortly the full Government response to the consultation alongside further detail on Awaab's law and guidance to support implementation.

The Government will bring Awaab's law into force for the social rented sector from October this year. We intend to act as quickly as possible to bring all relevant hazards within the scope of new legal requirements, but to ensure its effective implementation we will implement Awaab's law through a phased approach.

This sequencing will allow us to apply the protections that Awaab's law provides to damp and mould earlier than would be the case if we sought to apply it to a wider group of hazards from the outset. It will also provide for an initial period of testing and learning to ensure the reform is being delivered in a way that benefits social tenants and secures the lasting legacy that Awaab Ishak's family have fought so hard for. As we progressively extend the application of Awaab's law, we will continue to test and learn to make sure the new legal requirements are operating effectively.

While we believe a phased approach is the best means of putting in place a law that works, we appreciate fully that both social landlords and tenants want clarity and certainty about when all hazards will be covered by Awaab's law. The proposed phasing will be as follows:

From October 2025 social landlords will be required to address damp and mould hazards that present a significant risk of harm to tenants, within fixed timescales. From the same point in time, they will also have to address all emergency repairs, whether they relate to damp and mould or any other hazard, as soon as possible and within no longer than 24 hours.

In 2026, requirements will expand to apply to a wider range of hazards beyond damp and mould. The hazards we expect to extend Awaab's law to in this second stage of implementation include excess cold and excess heat; falls; structural collapse; fire, electrical and explosions; and hygiene hazards.

Then in 2027, the requirements of Awaab's law will expand to apply to the remaining hazards as defined by the HHSRS (excluding overcrowding). The full list of hazards can be found in schedule 1 to the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (England) Regulations 2005.

It is important to stress that the phased approach to introducing Awaab's law set out above in no way means that social landlords have any leeway when it comes to meeting their existing duties to address dangers to health and safety present in their homes before Awaab's law is fully implemented.

Awaab's law establishes timeframes for social landlords to act. It will also be enforceable through routes such as the housing ombudsman and, ultimately, the courts. However, social landlords already have a duty to keep their homes fit for human habitation and free of category 1 hazards and to remedy disrepair. The Government expect those duties to be met. Social landlords must ensure that their homes meet the decent homes standard, and it is critical that they take action as quickly as possible to resolve any issues of concern in the homes they let and to guarantee the safety and comfort of their occupants.

We intend to lay regulations in Parliament to implement Awaab's law on the basis of the sequencing outlined above as quickly as possible and will work to provide the sector with clarity and the necessary time to prepare ahead of the damp and mould requirements coming into force in October. Precise timings on the commencement of each phrase will be set out in those regulations.

Transforming social housing and putting tenants at its heart

Every social housing tenant deserves to live in a home that is decent, safe and secure and to receive a high-quality service from their landlord. However, it is also critical that tenants have a strong voice and that more is done to build trust and transparency between landlords and tenants.

Change is already under way. Having listened and heard both the Grenfell community and the family of Awaab Ishak, we are acting on the lessons so painfully learned from these entirely preventable injustices.

Since April 2024 a new consumer regulatory regime has been in force for social housing. The regulator of social housing now proactively seeks assurances that registered providers are meeting the outcomes set by consumer standards and it has stronger powers to hold social landlords accountable for providing quality homes and services to their tenants.

The consumer standards not only require landlords to provide an effective, efficient and timely repairs, maintenance and planned improvements service, but also to take tenants' views into account in their decision-making and give tenants a wide range of meaningful opportunities to influence and scrutinise their strategies, policies and services.

Alongside this, the Housing Ombudsman Service now has stronger powers and greater capacity to ensure social tenants have faster and easier access to redress when things go wrong, and that landlords take appropriate action when the ombudsman finds evidence of mismanagement.

In the coming months we will bring forward further reforms designed to drive up standards across social housing to build greater trust and transparency between landlords and tenants. The Government will:

Consult on a new decent homes standard and minimum energy efficiency standards, to ensure tenants' homes are made safe, warm, and free from disrepair;

Legislate to require social landlords to carry out electrical safety checks at least every five years, as well as mandatory appliance inspections on all electrical appliances that are provided by the landlord;

Introduce new access to information requirements for private registered providers, so tenants can request information about the management of their homes, to support them in holding their landlords to account; and

Set new standards for the competence and conduct of staff, to ensure tenants are always treated with dignity and to support the creation of a thriving, professional and skilled social housing workforce.

We are also taking powers through the Renters' Rights Bill to extend Awaab's law to the private rented sector. We will be consulting in due course on how to apply Awaab's law to privately rented homes in a way that works for the sector and is fair and proportionate for tenants and landlords.

Lastly, we must make sure that tenants' voices are heard. We already have a range of initiatives in place including our social housing resident panel and our Four Million Homes tenant education programme and Make Things Right communications campaign, which supports tenants to better understand and exercise their rights. The Government are exploring what more might be done to strengthen tenant voice so that tenants can speak for themselves on a more equal footing with other interests and can more effectively influence policymaking and regulation.

[HCWS423]

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